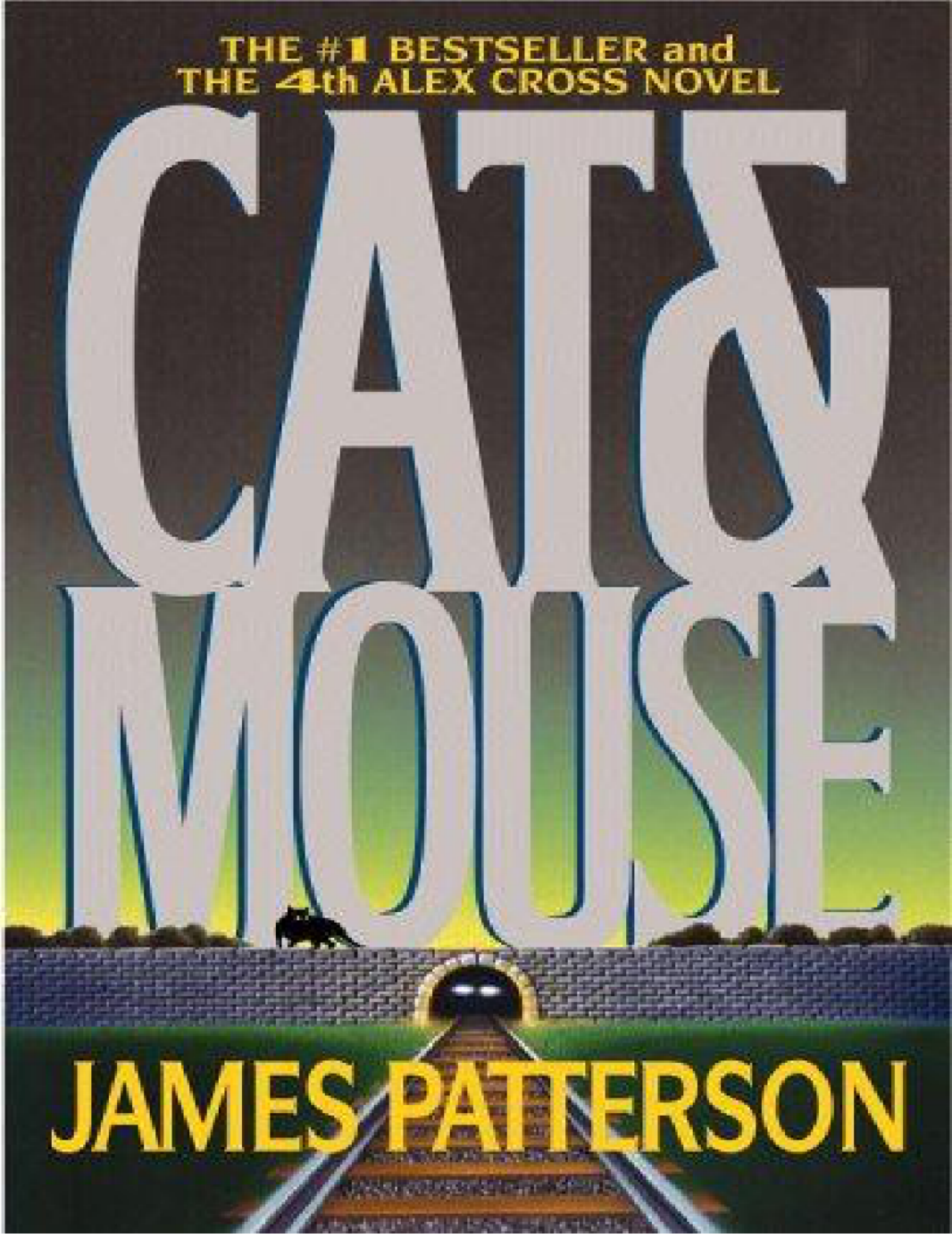
THE #1 BESTSELLER and
THE 4th ALEX CROSS NOVEL

CAT & MOUSE



JAMES PATTERSON

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Alex Cross's Trial (with Richard DiLallo)
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For Suzie and Diamond Jack

PROLOGUE

Chapter 1

fuel his hatred, if that was possible.

The cellar was cleanly swept, as he had expected it would be. Cross's tools were haphazardly arranged on a pegged Masonite board. A stained Georgetown ball cap was hung on a hook. Soneji put it on his own head. He couldn't resist.

He ran his hands over folded laundry laid out on a long wooden table. He felt close to the doomed family now. He despised them more than ever. He felt around the hammocks of the old woman's bra. He touched the boy's small Jockey underwear. He felt like a total creep, and he loved it.

Soneji picked up a small red reindeer sweater. It would fit Cross's little girl, Jannie. He held it to his face and tried to smell the girl. He anticipated Jannie's murder and only wished that Cross would get to see it, too.

He saw a pair of Everlast gloves and black Pony shoes tied around a hook next to a weathered old punching bag. They belonged to Cross's son, Damon, who must be nine years old now. Gary Soneji thought he would punch out the boy's heart.

Finally, he turned off the flashlight and sat all alone in the dark. Once upon a time, he had been a famous kidnapper and murderer. It was going to happen again. He was coming back with a vengeance that would blow everybody's mind.

He folded his hands in his lap and sighed. He had spun his web perfectly.

Alex Cross would soon be dead, and so would everyone he loved.

CHAPTER 2

prevailing theory was that Mr. Smith was an extraterrestrial. *No human could do the things that he did*. Or so they said.

Mr. Smith had to bend low to talk into Drew Cabot's ear, to be more intimate with his prey. He played music while he worked— all kinds of music. Today's selection was the overture to *Don Giovanni*. Opera buffa felt right to him.

Opera felt right for this *live* autopsy.

"Ten minutes or so after your death," Mr. Smith said, "flies will already have picked up the scent of gas accompanying the decomposition of your tissue. Green flies will lay the tiniest eggs within the orifices of your body. Ironically, the language reminds me of Dr. Seuss—'green flies and ham.' What could that mean? I don't know. It's a curious association, though."

Drew Cabot had lost a lot of blood, but he wasn't giving up. He was a tall, rugged man with silver-blond hair. A never-say-never sort of chap. The inspector shook his head back and forth until Smith finally removed his gag.

"What it is, Drew?" he asked. "Speak."

"I have a wife and two children. Why are you doing this to me? Why me?" he whispered.

"Oh, let's say because you're Drew. Keep it simple and unsentimental. You, Drew, are a piece of the puzzle."

He tugged the inspector's gag back into place. No more chitchat from Drew.

Mr. Smith continued with his observations as he made his next surgical cuts and *Don Giovanni* played on.

"Near the time of death, breathing will become strained, intermittent. It's exactly what you're feeling now, as if each breath could be your last. Cessation will occur within two or three minutes," whispered Mr. Smith, whispered the dreaded *Alien*. "Your life will end. May I be the first to congratulate you. I sincerely mean that, Drew. Believe it or not, *I envy you*. I wish I were Drew."

PART ONE

CHAPTER 3

"What are you mischief makers gawking at?" I turned to the kids, who were looking back and forth from my face to Christine's as if they were watching a championship tennis match.

"We're *gawking* at you, Daddy, and you're *gawking* at Christine!" Jannie said and laughed like the wicked child-witch of the North that she can be sometimes.

"She's Mrs. Johnson to you," I said as I gave Jannie my best squinting evil eye.

Jannie shrugged off my baleful look and frowned at me as only she can. "I know that, Daddy. She's the *principal* of my school. I know exactly who she is."

My daughter already understood many of life's important connections and mysteries. I was hoping that maybe someday she would explain them to me.

"Damon, do you have a point of view we should hear?" I asked. "Anything you'd like to add? Care to share some good fellowship and wit with us this morning?"

My son shook his head no, but he was smiling, too. He liked Christine Johnson just fine. Everybody did. Even Nana Mama approved, which is unheard of, and actually worried me some. Nana and I never seemed to agree about *anything*, and it's getting worse with age.

The kids were already climbing out of the car, and Jannie gave me a kiss good-bye. Christine waved and walked over.

"What a fine, upstanding father you are," she said. Her brown eyes twinkled. "You're going to make some lady in the neighborhood very happy one of these days. Very good with children, reasonably handsome, driving a classy sports car. My, my, my."

"My, my, back at you," I said. To top everything off, it was a beautiful morning in the early June. Shimmering blue skies, temperature in the low seventies, the air crisp and relatively clean. Christine was wearing a soft beige suit with a blue shirt, and beige flat-heeled shoes. Be still my heart.

A smile slid across my face. There was no way to stop it, to hold it back, and besides I didn't want to. It fit with the fine day I was starting to have.

"I hope you're not teaching my kids that kind of cynicism and irony inside that fancy school of yours."

"Of course I am, and so are all my teachers. We speak Educanto with the best of them. We're trained in cynicism, and we're all experts in irony. More important, we're excellent skeptics. I have to get inside now, so we don't miss a precious moment of indoctrination time."

"It's too late for Damon and Jannie. I've already programmed them. A child is fed with milk and praise. They have the sunniest

dispositions in the neighborhood, probably in all of Southeast, maybe in the entire city of Washington."

"Oh we've noticed that, and we accept the challenge. Got to run. Young minds to shape and change."

"I'll see you tonight?" I said as Christine was about to turn away and head toward the Sojourner Truth School.

"Handsome as sin, driving a nice Porsche, of course you'll see me tonight," she said. Then she turned away and headed toward the school.

We were about to have our first "official" date that night. Her husband, George, had died the previous winter, and now Christine felt she was ready to have dinner with me. I hadn't pushed her in any way, but I couldn't wait. Half a dozen years after the death of my wife, Maria, I felt as if I were coming out of a deep rut, maybe even a clinical depression. Life was looking as good as it had in a long, long time.

But as Nana Mama has often cautioned, "Don't mistake the edge of a rut for the horizon."

CHAPTER 4

It was all set to start in a couple of minutes, but in his mind it had already happened. It had happened a hundred times. He knew every single move from this point until the end.

Gary Soneji started the Jeep and headed toward Union Station. The scene of the crime-to-be, the scene of his masterpiece theater.

"Think the unthinkable," he muttered under his breath, "then *do* the unthinkable."

CHAPTER 5

Christine slowly and quietly opened the door a crack. She saw Bobbie Shaw, the second-grade teacher, scrubbing notes on the blackboard. Then she noticed row after row of mostly attentive faces, and among them Jannie Cross.

She found herself smiling as she watched Jannie, who happened to be talking to Ms. Shaw. Jannie Cross was so animated and bright, and she had such a sweet perspective on the world. She was a lot like her father. *Smart, sensitive, handsome as sin*.

Christine eventually walked on. Preoccupied, she found herself climbing the concrete stairs to the second floor. Even the walls of the stairwells were decorated with projects and brightly colored artwork, which was part of the reason most of the kids believed that this was "their school." Once you understood something was "yours," you protected it, felt a part of it. It was a simple enough idea, but one that the government in Washington seemed not to get.

She felt a little silly, but she checked on Damon, too.

Of all the boys and girls at the Truth School, Damon was probably her favorite. He had been even before she met Alex. It wasn't just that Damon was bright, and verbal, and could be very charming—Damon was also a really good person. He showed it time and again with the other kids, with his teachers, and even when his little sister entered the school this past semester. He'd treated her like his best friend in the world—and maybe he already understood that *she was*.

Christine finally headed back to her office, where the usual ten-to-twelve-hour day awaited her. She was thinking about Alex now, and she supposed that was really why she had gone and looked in on his kids.

She was thinking that she wasn't looking forward to their dinner date tonight. She was afraid of tonight, a little panicky, and she thought she knew why.

CHAPTER 6

He had already purchased his ticket for the Metroliner, but he didn't head for his train just yet.

Instead, Gary Soneji crossed the main lobby, hurrying away from the waiting room. He took a stairway next to the Center Café and climbed to the balcony on the second floor, which looked out on the lobby, about twenty feet below.

He gazed down and watched the lonely people streaming across the cavernous lobby. Most of these assholes had no idea how undeservedly lucky they were this particular morning. They would be safely on board their little commuter trains by the time the "light and sound" show began in just a few minutes.

What a beautiful, beautiful place this is, Soneji thought. How many times he'd dreamed about this scene.

This very scene at Union Station!

Long streaks and spears of morning sunlight shafted down through delicate skylights. They reflected off the walls and the high gilded ceiling. The main hall before him held an information booth, a magnificent electronic train arrival-and-departure board, the Center Café, Sfuzzi, and America restaurants.

The concourse led to a waiting area that had once been called "the largest room in the world." What a grand and historic venue he had chosen for today, his birthday.

Gary Soneji produced a small key from his pocket. He flipped it in the air and caught it. He opened a silver-gray metallic door that led into a room on the balcony.

He thought of it as *his room*. Finally, he had his own room—*upstairs* with everyone else. He closed the door behind him.

"Happy birthday, dear Gary, happy birthday to you."

CHAPTER 7

blended into the background of the train terminal's dark walls. He snuggled under the tarp. He was going to disappear, to be part of the scenery, *to be a sniper in a very public place. In Union Station!*

An old-fashioned-sounding train announcer was singing out the track and time for the next Metroliner to Baltimore, Wilmington, Philadelphia, and New York's Penn Station.

Soneji smiled to himself—*that was his getaway train*.

He had his ticket, and he still planned to be on it. No problem, just book it. He'd be on the Metroliner, or bust. Nobody could stop him now, except maybe Alex Cross, and even that didn't matter anymore. His plan had contingencies for every possibility, even his own death.

Then Soneji was lost in his thoughts. His memories were his cocoon.

He had been nine years old when a student named Charles Whitman opened fire out of a tower at the University of Texas, in Austin. Whitman was a former Marine, twenty-five years old. The outrageous, sensational event had galvanized him back then.

He'd collected every single story on the shootings, long pieces from *Time, Life, Newsweek*, the *New York Times, Philadelphia Inquirer, Times* of London, *Paris Match, Los Angeles Times, Baltimore Sun*. He still had the precious articles. They were at a friend's house, being held for posterity. They were *evidence—of past, present, and future crimes*.

Gary Soneji knew he was a good marksman. Not that he needed to be a crackerjack in this bustling crowd of targets. No shot he'd have to make in the train terminal would be over a hundred yards, and he was accurate at up to five hundred yards.

Now, I step out of my own nightmare and into the real world, he thought as the moment crystallized. A cold, hard shiver ran through his body. It was delicious, tantalizing. He peered through the Browning's telescope at the busy, nervous, milling crowd.

He searched for the first victim. *Life was so much more beautiful and interesting through a target scope*.

CHAPTER 8

would get the subtle, special message other than himself? No, he had to think of others, too. This was a time to be selfless.

He moved the aiming post again, the circle of death. There were an amazing number of commuters in blue suits and black wing tips. Business sheep.

A father and teenage son floated into the circle, as if they had been put there by the hand of God.

Gary Soneji inhaled. Then he slowly exhaled. It was his shooting ritual, the one he'd practiced for so many years alone in the woods. *He had imagined doing this so many times. Taking out a perfect stranger, for no good reason.*

He gently, very gently, pulled the trigger toward the center of his eye.

His body was completely still, almost lifeless. He could feel the faint pulse in his arm, the pulse in his throat, the approximate speed of his heartbeat.

The shot made a loud cracking noise, and the sound seemed to follow the flight of the bullet down toward the lobby. Smoke spiraled upward, inches in front of the rifle barrel. Quite beautiful to observe.

The teenager's head exploded inside the telescopic circle. Beautiful. The head flew apart before his eyes. The Big Bang in miniature, no?

Then Gary Soneji pulled the trigger a second time. He murdered the father before he had a chance to grieve. He felt absolutely nothing for either of them. Not love, not hate, not pity. He didn't flinch, wince, or even blink.

There was no stopping Gary Soneji now, no turning back.

CHAPTER 9

We both wore protective vests over our sport shirts. We were "scooting," as Soneji had advised me over the phone.

"What the hell is he doing in there?" Sampson said through tightly gritted teeth. "That son of a bitch has always been crazy."

We were less than fifty yards from the terminal's glass-and-wood front doors. People continued to stream outside.

"He used to shoot guns as a boy," I told Sampson. "Used to kill pets in his neighborhood outside Princeton. He'd do sniper kills from the woods. Nobody ever solved it at the time. He told me about the sniping when I interviewed him at Lorton Prison. Called himself the pet assassin."

"Sounds like he graduated to people," Sampson muttered.

We raced up the long driveway, heading toward the front entrance of the ninety-year-old terminal. Sampson and I were moving, burning up shoe leather, and it seemed like an eternity since Soneji's phone call.

There was a pause in the shooting—then it began again. Weird as hell. It definitely sounded like rifle reports coming from inside.

Cars and taxis in the train terminal's driveway were backing out, trying to get away from the scene of gunfire and madness. Commuters and day travelers were still pushing their way out of the building's front doors. I'd never been involved with a sniper situation before.

In the course of my life in Washington, I'd been inside Union Station several hundred times. Nothing like this, though. Nothing even close to this morning.

"He's got himself trapped in there. Purposely trapped! Why the hell would he do that?" Sampson asked as we came up to the front doors.

"Worries me too," I said. Why had Gary Soneji called me? Why would he effectively trap himself in Union Station?

Sampson and I slipped into the lobby of Union Station. The shooting from the balcony—from up high somewhere—suddenly started up again. We both went down flat on the floor.

Had Soneji already seen us?

Chapter 10

"Hard to tell. But he's up in there somewhere, that general area." He pointed to the south balcony that ran above the long line of doorways at the front of Union Station. Nobody was using the doors now. Soneji was in full control.

"Can't see him from down here." Sampson snorted at my side. "He might be moving around, changing position. That's how a good sniper would work it."

"Has he said anything? Made any announcements? Any demands?" I asked the patrolman.

"Nothing. He just started shooting people like he was having target practice. Four vics so far. Sucker can shoot."

I couldn't see the fourth body. Maybe somebody, a father, mother, or friend, had pulled one of the victims in off the floor. I thought of my own family. Soneji had come to our house once. And he had called me here—invited me to his coming-out party at Union Station.

Suddenly, from up on the balcony above us, a rifle barked! The flat crack of the weapon echoed off the train station's thick walls. This was a shooting gallery with human targets.

A woman screamed inside the America restaurant. I saw her go down hard as if she'd slipped on ice. Then there were lots of moans from inside the café.

The firing stopped again. *What the hell was he doing up there?*

"Let's take him out before he goes off again," I whispered to Sampson. "Let's do it."

Chapter 11

the anteroom where he was shooting. We pressed against the wall, Glocks out.

"You okay?" I whispered. We had been here before, similar bad situation, but that didn't make it any better.

"This is fun shit, huh, Alex? First thing in the morning too. Haven't even had my coffee and doughnut."

"Next time he fires," I said, "we go get him. He's been firing six shots each time."

"I noticed," Sampson said without looking at me. He patted my leg. We took in big sips of air.

We didn't have to wait long. Soneji began another volley of shots. *Six shots. Why six shots each time?*

He knew we'd be coming for him. Hell, he'd invited me to his shooting spree.

"Here we go," I said.

We ran across the marble-and-stone corridor. I took out the key to the anteroom, squeezed it between my index finger and thumb.

I turned the key.

Click!

The door wouldn't open! I jiggled the handle. Nothing.

"What the hell?" Sampson said behind me, anger in his voice. "What's wrong with the door?"

"I just locked it," I told him. "*Soneji left it open for us*."

CHAPTER 12

I climbed the stairs, stopping and starting so he wouldn't get a clear shot from above. My heart was pounding, my legs trembling. I hoped that Sampson was close behind. I needed cover.

At the top of the stairway, a hatchway was open. No Gary Soneji here either. I had been lured deeper and deeper into some kind of trap, into his web.

My stomach was rolling. I felt a sharp pain building up behind my eyes. Soneji was still somewhere in Union Station. He had to be. *He'd said he wanted to see me*.

CHAPTER 13

almost suffocated. “Sic ’em. Sic the bunny!” he commanded. The cat caught the scent of the fresh kill and took off in a pouncing run. Gary put the .22 rifle on his shoulder and watched. He sighted on the moving target. He caressed the trigger of his deuce-deuce, and then he fired. He was learning how to kill.

You’re such an addict! He chastised himself now, back in the present, on the Metroliner train. Little had changed since he’d been the original Bad Boy in the Princeton area. His stepmother—the gruesome and untalented whore of Babylon—used to lock him in the basement regularly back then. She would leave him alone in the dark, sometimes for as long as ten to twelve hours. He learned to love the darkness, to be the darkness. He learned to love the cellar, to make it his favorite place in the world.

Gary beat her at her own game.

He lived in the underworld, his own private hell. He truly believed he was the Prince of Darkness.

Gary Soneji had to keep bringing himself back to the present, back to Union Station and his beautiful plan. The Metro police were searching the trains.

The police were outside right now! Alex Cross was probably among them.

What a great start to things, and this was only the beginning.

Chapter 14

"They won't. I tried," the woman told him. Her eyes were frozen, locked in an odd place. He loved that look. It was hard for Soneji to glance away, to focus on the approaching policemen and the threat they might present.

"We need to see identifications from everyone," one of the detectives was announcing. He had a deep, no-nonsense voice that got everybody's attention. "Have IDs with pictures out when we come through. Thank you."

The two detectives got to his row of seats. This was it, wasn't it? Funny, he didn't feel much of anything. He was ready to take both cops out.

Soneji controlled his breathing and also his heartbeat. *Control, that was the ticket.* He had control over the muscles in his face, and especially his eyes. He'd changed the color of his eyes for today. Changed his hair color from blond to gray. Changed the shape of his face. He looked soft, bloated, as harmless as your average traveling salesman.

He showed a driver's license and Amex card in the name of Neil Stuart from Wilmington, Delaware. He also had a Visa card and a picture ID for the Sports Club in Wilmington. There was nothing memorable about the way he looked. Just another business sheep.

The detectives were checking his ID when Soneji spotted Alex Cross outside the train car. *Make my day*.

Cross was coming his way, and he was peering in through the windows at passengers. Cross was still looking pretty good. He was six three and well built. He carried himself like an athlete, and looked younger than forty-one.

Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, what a mindblower. Trip the goddamn light fantastic. I'm right here, Cross. You could almost touch me if you wanted to. Look in at me. Look at me, Cross. I command you to look at me now!

The tremendous anger and fury growing inside him was dangerous, Soneji knew. He could wait until Alex Cross was right on top of him, then pop up and put half a dozen shots into his face.

Six head shots. Each of the six would be well deserved for what Cross had done to him. Cross had ruined his life—no, Alex Cross had destroyed him. Cross was the reason all of this was happening now. Cross was to blame for the murders in the train station. It was all Alex Cross's fault.

Cross, Cross, Cross! Was this the end now? Was this the big finale? How could it be?

Cross looked so almighty as he walked, so above-the-fray. He had to give that to Cross. He was two or three inches taller than the other cops, smooth brown skin. *Sugar*—that's what his friend Sampson called him.

Well—he had a big surprise for Sugar. Big unexpected surprise. Mindscrewer for the ages surprise.

If you catch me, Dr. Cross—you catch yourself. Do you understand that? Don't worry—you will soon enough.

"Thank you, Mr. Stuart," said the detective as he handed Soneji back his credit card and the Delaware driver's license.

Soneji nodded and offered a thin smile to the detective, and then his eyes flicked back to the window.

Alex Cross was right there. *Don't look so humble, Cross. You're not that great.*

He wanted to start shooting now. He was in heat. He experienced something like hot flashes. He could do Alex Cross right now. There was no doubt about it. He hated that face, that walk, everything about the doctor-detective.

Alex Cross slowed his step. Then Cross looked right in at him. He was five feet away.

Gary Soneji slowly moved his eyes up to Cross, then very naturally over to the other detectives, then back to Cross.

Hello, Sugar.

Cross didn't recognize him. How could he? The detective looked right at his face—then he moved on. He kept on walking down the platform, picking up speed.

Cross had his back to him and it was an almost irresistibly inviting target. A detective up ahead was calling to him, motioning for Cross to come. He loved the idea of shooting Cross in the back. A cowardly murder, that was the best. That's what people really hated.

Then Soneji relaxed back into his train seat.

Cross didn't recognize me. I'm that good. I'm the best he's ever faced by far. I'll prove it, too.

Make no mistake about it. I will win.

I am going to murder Alex Cross and his family, and no one can stop it from happening.

Chapter 15

When I finally came downstairs, I got "the business" from my kids. Even Rosie joined in the fun, racing around the living room like the family's designated cheerleader.

"You look so nice, Daddy. You look *beautiful*." Jannie winked and gave me the A-OK sign.

She was being sincere, but she was also getting a large charge out of my "date" for the night. She obviously delighted in the idea of my getting all dolled up just to see the principal from her school.

Damon was even worse. He saw me coming down the stairs and started giggling. Once he started, he couldn't stop. He mumbled, "Beautiful."

"I'll get you for this," I told him. "Ten times over, maybe a hundred times. Wait until you bring somebody home to meet your pops. Your day will come."

"It's worth it," Damon said, and continued to laugh like the little madman that he can be. His antics got Jannie going so bad that she was finally rolling around on the carpet. Rosie hopped back and forth over the two of them.

I got down on the floor, growled like Jabba the Hut, and started wrestling with the kids. As usual, they were healing me. I looked over at Nana Mama, who was standing in the doorway between the kitchen and dining room. She was strangely quiet, not joining in as she usually does.

"You want some of this, old woman?" I said as I held Damon and lightly rubbed my chin against his head.

"No, no. But you're sure nervous as Rosie tonight," Nana said and finally started to laugh herself. "Why, I haven't seen you like this since you were around fourteen and off to see Jeanne Allen, if I remember the name correctly. Jannie's right, though, you do look, let's say, rather dashing."

I finally let Damon up off the floor. I stood and brushed off my snazzy dinner clothes. "Well, I just want to thank all of you for being so supportive in my time of need." I said it with false solemnity and a hurt look on my face.

"You're welcome!" they all chorused. "Have a good time on your date! You look *beautiful!*"

I headed out to the car, refusing to look back and give them the satisfaction of one final taunting grin or another rousing huzzah, I did feel better, though, strangely revived.

I had promised my family, but also myself, that I was going to have some kind of normal life now. Not just a career, not a series of murder investigations. And yet as I drove away from the house, my last thought was, *Gary Soneji is out there again. What are you going to do about it?*

For starters, I was going to have a terrific, peaceful, exciting dinner with Christine Johnson.

I wasn't going to give Gary Soneji another thought for the rest of the night.

I was going to be *dashing*, if not downright *beautiful*.

CHAPTER 16

usually try to keep “physical allure” in its place, but heads turned as Christine and I walked across the dining room.

I’d completely forgotten what it was like to be out with someone and have that happen. I must admit that I sort of liked the feeling. I was remembering what it was like to be with someone you want to be with. I was also remembering what it was like to feel whole, or almost whole, or at least on the way to being whole again.

Our cozy booth overlooked Pennsylvania Avenue and also had a view of Hilton tinkering away at his piano. Kind of perfect.

“So how was your day?” Christine asked after we settled into the booth.

“Uneventful,” I said and shrugged. “Just another day in the life of the DCPD.”

Christine shrugged right back at me. “I heard something on the radio about a shooting at Union Station. Weren’t you involved just a little bit with Gary Soneji at one point in your illustrious career?”

“Sorry, I’m off-duty now,” I said to her. “I love your dress, by the way.” *I also love that old brooch that you turned into a necklace. I like that you wore flats just in case I needed to be taller tonight, which I don’t*.

“Thirty-one dollars,” she said and smiled shyly, wonderfully. The dress looked like a million on her. I thought so anyway.

I checked her eyes to see if she was all right. It had been more than six months since her husband’s death, but that isn’t really a lot of time. She seemed fine to me. I suspected she’d tell me if that changed.

We picked out a nice bottle of merlot. Then we shared Ipswich clams, which were full belly and a little messy, but a good start to dinner at Kinkead’s. For a main dish, I had a velvety salmon stew.

Christine made an even better choice. Lobster with buttery cabbage, bean puree, and truffle oil.

All the while we ate, the two of us never shut up. Not for a minute. I hadn’t felt so free and easy around someone in a long, long time.

“Damon and Jannie say you’re the best principal ever. They paid me a dollar each to say that. What’s your secret?” I asked Christine at one point. I found that I was fighting off an urge simply to babble when I was around her.

Christine was thoughtful for a moment before she answered. “Well, I guess the easiest and maybe the truest answer is that it just makes me feel good to teach. The other answer I like goes something like this. If you’re right-handed, it’s really hard to write with your left hand. Well, most kids are *all left-handed* at first. I try to always remember that. That’s my secret.”

“Tell me about today at school,” I said, staring into her brown eyes, unable not to.

She was surprised by my question. “You really want to hear about my day at school? Why?”

“I absolutely do. I don’t even know why.” *Except that I love the sound of your voice. Love the way your mind works*.

“Actually, today was a great day,” she said, and her eyes lit up again. “You sure you want to hear this, Alex? I don’t want to bore you with work stuff.”

I nodded. “I’m sure. I don’t ask a whole lot of questions I don’t want to hear the answers to.”

“Well then, I’ll tell you about my day. Today, all the kids had to pretend they were in their seventies and eighties. The kids had to move a little more slowly than they’re used to. They had to deal with infirmities, and being alone, and usually not being the center of attention. We call it ‘*getting under other people’s skin*,’ and we do it a lot at the Truth School. It’s a great program and I had a great day, Alex. Thanks for asking. That’s nice.”

Christine asked me about my day again, and I told her as little as possible. I didn’t want to disturb her, and I didn’t need to relive the day myself. We talked about jazz, and classical music, and Amy Tan’s latest novel. She seemed to know about everything, and was surprised I had read *The Hundred Secret Senses*, and even more surprised that I liked it.

She talked about what it was like for her growing up in Southeast, and she told me a big secret of hers: She told me about “Dumbo-Gumbo.”

“All through grade-school days,” Christine said, “I was Dumbo-Gumbo. That’s what some of the other kids called me. I have big ears, you see. Like Dumbo the flying elephant.”

She pulled back her hair. “Look.”

“Very pretty,” I said to her.

She laughed. “Don’t blow your credibility. I *do* have big ears. And I do have this *big* smile, lots of teeth and *gums*.”

“So some smart-ass kid came up with Dumbo-Gumbo?”

“My brother, Dwight, did it to me. He also came up with ‘Gumbo Din.’ He still hasn’t said he’s sorry.”

“Well, I’m sorry for him. Your smile is dazzling, and your ears are just right.”

She laughed again. I loved to hear her laugh. I loved everything about her actually. I couldn’t have been happier with our first night out.

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

He opened his duffel bag and took out his weapon of choice. He was especially proud of this one. He'd been waiting for a long time to use it.

Gary Soneji finally crossed the street. He marched up to the front door as if he owned the place, just as he had four years ago, the last time he'd been here, the day Alex Cross had barged into his life along with his partner, John Sampson.

The door was unlocked—how sweet—his wife and daughter were waiting up for him, eating Poppycock and watching *Friends* on television.

"Hi. Remember me?" Soneji said in a soft voice.

They both started to scream.

His own sweet wife, Missy.

His darling little girl, Roni.

Screaming like strangers, because they knew him so well, and because they had seen his weapon.

Chapter 19

had a good description of what Gary Soneji looked like now. Since Soneji had demonstrated unusual skill with disguises in the past, the news wasn't surprising, but it was disturbing to all of us.

Soneji's personal history was displayed on another part of the board. A long, curling computer printout listed every jurisdiction where he had ever been charged with a crime, as well as several unsolved homicides that overlapped his early years in Princeton, New Jersey.

Polaroid pictures depicting the evidence we had so far were also pinned up. Captions had been written in marker on the photos. The captions read: "known skills, Gary Soneji"; "hiding locations, Gary Soneji"; "physical characteristics, Gary Soneji"; "preferred weapons, Gary Soneji."

There was a category for "known associates" on the board, but this was still bare. It was likely to remain that way. To my knowledge, Soneji had always worked alone. Was that assumption still accurate? I wondered. Had he changed since our last run-in?

Around six-thirty that night, I got a call from the FBI evidence labs in Quantico, Virginia. Curtis Waddle was a friend of mine, and knew how I felt about Soneji. He had promised he'd pass on information as fast as he got it himself.

"You sitting down, Alex? Or are you pacing around with one of those insipid, state-of-the-artless cordless phones in your hand?" he asked.

"I'm pacing, Curtis. But I'm carrying around an old-fashioned phone. It's even black. Alexander Graham himself would approve."

The lab head laughed and I could picture his broad, freckled face, his frizzy red hair tied with a rubber band in a ponytail. Curtis loves to talk, and I've found you have to let him go on or he gets hurt and can even get a little spiteful.

"Good man, good man. Listen, Alex, I've got something here, but I don't think you're going to like it. I don't like it. I'm not even sure if we trust what we have."

I edged in a few words. "Uh, what do you have, Curtis?"

"The blood we found on the stock and barrel of the rifle at Union Station? We've got a definite match on it. Though, as I said, I don't know if I trust what we have. Kyle agrees. Guess what? It's not Soneji's blood."

Curtis was right. I didn't like hearing that at all. I hate surprises in any murder investigation. "What the hell does that mean? Whose blood is it then, Curtis? You know yet?"

I could hear him sigh, then blow out air in a *whoosh*. "Alex, it's *yours*. Your blood was on the sniper rifle."

Part Two

CHAPTER 20

The blood rushing through his brain made a deafening, pounding sound. Not nice. Not conductive to sane, rational thought. *The blood? Had the bloodhounds figured it out yet?*

The train station was filled to the gills with shoving, pushing, and grumbling New Yorkers at their worst. These goddamn commuters were unbelievably aggressive and irritating.

Couldn't any of them see that? Well, hell, sure they could. And what did they do about it? They got even more aggressive and obnoxious.

None of them came close to approaching his own seething anger, though. Not even close. His hatred was pure. Distilled. He *was* anger. He did the things most of them only fantasized about. Their anger was fuzzy and unfocused, bursting in their bubbleheads. He saw anger clearly, and he acted upon it swiftly.

This was so fine, being inside Penn Station, creating another scene. He was really getting into the spirit now. He was noticing everything in full-blast, touchy-feely 3-D. Dunkin' Donuts, Knot Just Pretzels, Shoetrician Shoe Shine. The omnipresent rumble of the trains down below—it was just as he'd always imagined it.

He knew what would come next—and how it would all end.

Gary Soneji had a six-inch knife pressed against his leg. It was a real collector's item. Had a mother-of-pearl handle and a tight serpentine blade on both sides. "An ornate knife for an ornate individual," a greasy salesman had told him once upon a long time ago. "Wrap it up!" he'd said. Had it ever since. For special occasions like today. Or once to kill an FBI agent named Roger Graham.

He passed Hudson News, with all of its glossy magazine faces staring out at the world, staring at him, trying to work their propaganda. He was still being shoved and elbowed by his fellow commuters. Man, didn't they ever stop?

Wow! He saw a character from his dreams, from way back when he was a kid. There was *the guy*. No doubt about it. He recognized the face, the way the guy held his body, everything about him. *It was the guy in the gray-striped business getup, the one who reminded him of his father.*

"You've been asking for this for a long time!" Soneji growled at Mr. Gray Stripes. "You asked for this."

He drove the knife blade forward, felt it sink into flesh. It was just as he had imagined it.

The businessman saw the knife plunge near his heart. A frightened, bewildered look crossed his face. Then he fell to the station floor, stone cold dead, his eyes rolled back and his mouth frozen in a silent scream.

Soneji knew what he had to do next. He pivoted, danced to his left, and cut a second victim who looked like a slacker type. The guy

wore a “Naked Lacrosse” T-shirt. The details didn’t matter, but some of them stuck in his mind. He cut a black man selling *Street News*. Three for three.

The thing that really mattered was the *blood*. Soneji watched as the precious blood spilled onto the dirty, stained, and mottled concrete floor. It spattered the clothes of commuters, pooled under the bodies. The blood was a clue, a Rorschach test for the police and FBI hunters to analyze. The blood was there for Alex Cross to try and figure out.

Gary Soneji dropped his knife. There was incredible confusion, shrieking everywhere, panic in Penn Station that finally woke the walking dead.

He looked up at the maze of maroon signs, each with neat Helvetic lettering: *Exit 31st St., Parcel Checking, Visitor Information, Eighth Avenue Subway*.

He knew the way out of Penn Station. It was all preordained. He had made this decision a thousand times before.

He scurried back down into the tunnels again. No one tried to stop him. He was the Bad Boy again. Maybe his stepmother had been right about that. His *punishment* would be to ride the New York subways.

Brrrr. Scar-ry!

Chapter 21

night, you're right."

We turned down F Street and entered Garfield Park, which was especially pretty in the early summer. We walked in silence. Finally we stopped near a ballfield swarming with little kids. A frenzied baseball game was in progress.

We weren't far from the Eisenhower Freeway, and the *whoosh* of rush-hour traffic was steady, almost soothing. Tulip poplars were in bloom, and coral honeysuckle. Mothers and fathers were playing with their kids; everybody in a nice mood tonight.

This had been my neighborhood park for almost thirty years, and during the daylight hours it can almost be idyllic. Maria and I used to come here all the time when Damon was a toddler and she was pregnant with Jannie. Much of that is starting to fade away now, which is probably a good thing, but it's also sad.

Christine finally spoke. "I'm sorry, Alex." She had been staring at the ground, but now she raised her lovely eyes to mine. "About the other night. The bad scene at my car. I guess I panicked. To be honest, I'm not even sure what happened."

"Let's be honest," I said. "Why not?"

I could tell this was hard for her, but I needed to know how she felt. I needed more than she'd told me outside the restaurant.

"I want to try and explain," she said. Her hands were clenched. One of her feet was tapping rapidly. Lots of bad signs.

"Maybe it's all my fault," I said. "I'm the one who kept asking you to dinner until—"

Christine reached out and covered my hand with hers. "Please let me finish," she said. The half smile came again. "Let me try to get this out once and for all. I was going to call you anyway. I was planning to call you tonight. I would have.

"You're nervous now, and so am I. God, am I nervous," she said quietly. "I know I've hurt your feelings, and I don't like that. It's the last thing I meant to do. You don't deserve to be hurt."

Christine was shivering a little. Her voice was shaking, too, as she spoke. "Alex, my husband died because of the kind of violence you have to live with every day. You accept that world, but I don't think I can. I'm just not that kind of person. I couldn't bear to lose someone else I was close to. Am I making sense to you? I'm feeling a little confused."

Everything was becoming clearer to me now. Christine's husband had been killed in December. She said that there had been serious problems in the marriage, but she loved him. She had seen him shot to death in their home, seen him die. I had held her then. I was part of the murder case.

I wanted to hold her again, but I knew it was the wrong thing to

do. She was still hugging herself tightly. I understood her feelings.

"Please listen to me, Christine. I'm not going to die until probably in my late eighties. I'm too stubborn and ornery to die. That would give us longer together than either of us has been alive so far. Forty-plus years. It's also a long time to avoid each other."

Christine shook her head a little. She continued to look into my eyes. Finally, a smile peeked through.

"I *do* like the way your crazy mind works. One minute, you're Detective Cross—the next minute you're this very open, very sweet child." She put her hands up to her face. "Oh, God, I don't even know what I'm *saying*."

Everything inside me said to do it, every instinct, every feeling. I slowly, carefully, reached out and took Christine into my arms. She fit so right. I could feel myself melting and I liked it. I even liked that my legs felt shaky and weak.

We kissed for the first time and Christine's mouth was soft and very sweet. Her lips pushed against mine. She didn't pull away, as I'd expected she might. I ran the tips of my fingers along one cheek, then the other.

Her skin was smooth and my fingers tingled at the tips. It was as if I had been without air for a long, long time and suddenly could breathe again. I could breathe. I felt alive.

Christine had shut her eyes, but now she opened them. Our eyes met, and held. "Just like I imagined it," she whispered, "times about four hundred and fifty."

Then the worst thing imaginable happened—my pager *beeped*.

CHAPTER 22

and-coming young assholes like “Sly” Groza.

Goldman was still in good shape—better than Groza, with his steady diet of fast foods and high-octane colas and sugary teas. He ran against the tide of people streaming out of Penn Station. The murders, at least the ones he knew about so far, had taken place in and around the main waiting area of the train station.

The killer had chosen the rush hour for a reason, Goldman was thinking as the train-station waiting area came into view. Either that, or the killer just happened to go wacko at a time when the station was jam-packed with victims-to-be.

So what brought the wacko to Penn Station at rush hour? Manning Goldman wondered. He already had one scary theory that he was keeping to himself so far.

“Manning, you think he’s still in here someplace?” Groza asked from behind.

Groza’s habit of calling people by their first name, as if they were all camp counselors together, really got under his skin.

Goldman ignored his partner. No, he didn’t believe the killer was still in Penn Station. The killer was on the loose in New York. That bothered the hell out of him. It made him sick to his stomach, which wasn’t all that hard these days, the past couple of years, actually.

Two pushcart vendors were artfully blocking the way to the crime scene. One cart was called Montego City Slickers Leather, the other From Russia With Love. He wished they would go back to Jamaica and Russia, respectively.

“NYPD. Make way. Move these ashcarts!” Goldman yelled at the vendors.

He pushed his way through the crowd of onlookers, other cops, and train-station personnel who were gathered near the body of a black man with braided hair and tattered clothing. Bloodstained copies of *Street News* were scattered around the body, so Goldman knew the dead man’s occupation and his reason for being at the train station.

As he got up close, he saw that the victim was probably in his late twenties. There was an unusual amount of blood. Too much. The body was surrounded by a bright red pool.

Goldman walked up to a man in a dark blue suit with a blue-and-red Amtrak pin prominent on his lapel.

“Homicide Detective Goldman,” he said, flashing his shield. “Tracks ten and eleven.” Goldman pointed at one of the overhead signs. “What train would have come in on those tracks—just before the knifings?”

The Amtrak manager consulted a thick booklet he kept in his breast pocket.

“The last train on ten… that would have been the Metroliner from Philly, Wilmington, Baltimore, originating in Washington.”

Goldman nodded. It was exactly what he’d been afraid of when he’d heard that a spree killer had struck at the train station, and that he was able to get away. That fact meant he was clearheaded. The killer had a plan in mind.

Goldman suspected that the Union Station and Penn Station killer might be one and the same—and that now the maniac was here in New York.

“You got any idea yet, Manning?” Groza was yapping again.

Goldman finally spoke to his partner without looking at him. “Yeah, I was just thinking that they’ve got earplugs, bunghole plugs, so why not *mouth* plugs.”

Then Manning Goldman went to scare up a public phone. He had to make a call to Washington, D.C. He believed that Gary Soneji had come to New York. Maybe he was on some kind of twenty- or thirty-city spree killer tour.

Anything was a possibility these days.

CHAPTER 23

A few minutes passed before Nana appeared in the kitchen. She was wearing the cutest housedress, blue stripes with big white buttons down the front. She looked as if she were ready to begin her day at half past twelve in the morning.

"I have two words for you, Alex. Marry her."

I rolled my eyes. "It's not what you think, old woman. It's not that simple."

She poured some steaming tea for herself. "Oh, it is absolutely that simple, granny son. You've got that spring in your step lately, a nice gleam in your eyes. You're *long gone*, mister. You're just the last one to hear about it. Tell me something. This is a serious question."

I sighed. "You're still a little high from your sweet dreams. What? Ask your silly question."

"Well, it's this. If I was to charge you, say, ninety dollars for our sessions, *then* would you be more likely to take my fantastic advice?"

We both laughed at her sly joke, her unique brand of humor.

"Christine doesn't want to see me."

"Oh, dear," Nana said.

"Yeah, oh, dear. She can't see herself involved with a homicide detective."

Nana smiled. "The more I hear about Christine Johnson, the more I like her. Smart lady. Good head on those pretty shoulders."

"Are you going to let me talk?" I asked.

Nana frowned and gave me her serious look. "You always get to say what you want, just not at the exact moment you want to say it. Do you love this woman?"

"From the first time I saw her, I felt something extraordinary. Heart leads head. I know that sounds crazy."

She shook her head and still managed to sip steaming hot tea. "Alex, as smart as you are, you sometimes seem to get everything backwards. You don't sound crazy at all. You sound like you're better for the first time since Maria died. Will you look at the evidence that we have here? You have a spring back in your step again. Your eyes are bright and smiling. You're even being nice to me lately. Put it all together—your heart is working again."

"She's afraid that I could die on the job. Her husband was murdered, remember?"

Nana rose from her chair at the kitchen table. She shuffled around to my side, and she stood very close to me. She was so much smaller than she used to be, and that worried me. I couldn't imagine my life without her in it.

"I love you, Alex," she said. "Whatever you do, I'll still love you. *Marry her*. At least live with Christine." She laughed to herself. "I can't believe I said that."

Nana gave me a kiss, and then headed back to bed.
“I *do too* have suitors,” she called from the hall.
“Marry one,” I called back to her.
“I’m not in love, lemon meringue man. You are.”

CHAPTER 24

people sitting around us smiled, looking up from their newspapers, coffees, laptop computers.

"Phew. Fire seems to be out," Sampson said and chuckled deeply. "Man, your head is *hot* as Hades to the touch. You must have been brainstorming some powerful ideas. Am I right about that?"

"No, I was thinking about Christine," I told Sampson.

"You lying sack. You *should* have been thinking about Christine Johnson. Then I would have had to beat the fire out someplace else. How you two doing? If I might be so bold as to ask."

"She's great, she's the best, John. Really something else. She's smart and she's funny. Ho ho, ha ha."

"And she's almost as good-looking as Whitney Houston, and she's sexy as hell. But none of that answers my question. What's happening with you two? You trying to hide your love on me? My spy, Ms. Jannie, told me you had a date the other night. Did you have a big date and not tell me about it?"

"We went to Kinkead's for dinner. Had a good time. Good food, great company. One little minor problem, though: She's afraid I'm going to get myself killed, so she doesn't want to see me anymore. Christine's still mourning her husband."

Sampson nodded, slid down his shades to check me out sans light filtration. "That's interesting. Still mourning, huh? Proves she's a good lady. By the by, since you brought up the forbidden topic, something I should tell you, all-star. You ever get capped in action your family will mourn you for an indecent length of time. Myself, I would carry the torch of grief up to and through the funeral services. That's it, though. Thought you should know. So, are you two star-crossed lovers going to have another date?"

Sampson liked to talk as if we were girlfriends in a Terry McMillan novel. We could be like that sometimes, which is unusual for men, especially two tough guys like us. He was on a roll now. "I think you two are so cute together. Everybody does. Whole town is talking. The kids, Nana, your aunties."

"They are, are they?"

I got up and sat down across the aisle from him. Both seats were empty. I spread out my notes on Gary Soneji and started to read them again.

"Thought you would never get the hint," Sampson said as he stretched his wide body across both seats.

As always, there was nothing like working a job with him. Christine was wrong about my getting hurt. Sampson and I were going to live forever. We wouldn't even need DHEA or melatonin to help.

"We're going to get Gary Soneji's ass in a sling. Christine's going to fall hard for you, like you obviously already fell for her. Everything

will be beautiful, Sugar. Way it has to be."

I don't know why, but I couldn't quite make myself believe that.

"I know you're thinking negative shit already," Sampson said without even looking over at me, "but just watch. Nothing but happy endings this time."

CHAPTER 25

he would fantasize about committing murders and other atrocities—*as soon as he was let out*. His idée fixe was that release from the cellar would give him back his freedom and power. He'd sit in the cellar obsessing on what he was going to do as soon as he got out. You happen to notice any cellarlike locations around here? Or maybe at Union Station?"

Sampson showed his teeth, which are large and very white, and can give you the impression that he likes you maybe more than he does. "The train tunnels represent the cellar of Gary's childhood house, right? When he gets out of the tunnels, all hell breaks loose. He finally takes his revenge on the world."

"I think that's part of what's going on," I said. "But it's never that simple with Gary. It's a start anyway."

We had reached the main level of Penn Station. This was probably how it had been when Soneji arrived here the night before. More and more I was thinking that the NYPD had it right. Soneji could definitely be the Penn Station killer, too.

I saw a mob of travelers lingering beneath the flipping numbers of the Train Departures board. I could almost see Gary Soneji standing where I was now, taking it all in—*released from the cellar to be the Bad Boy again! Still wanting to do famous crimes and succeeding beyond his craziest dreams*.

"Dr. Cross, I presume."

I heard my name as Sampson and I wandered into the brightly lit waiting area of the station. A bearded man with a gold ear stud was smiling at his small joke. He extended his hand.

"I'm Detective Manning Goldman. Good of you to come. Gary Soneji was here yesterday." He said it with absolute certainty.

CHAPTER 26

arrived at five-ten. I want to double-check the stops," he barked at Groza. The younger detective skulked off to do Goldman's bidding.

"We heard there were three stabbings, three deaths?" Sampson finally spoke. I knew that he'd been sizing up Goldman. He'd probably come to the conclusion that the detective was a New York asshole of the first order.

"That's what it says on the front pages of all the daily newspapers," Goldman cracked out of the side of his mouth. It was a nasty remark, delivered curtly.

"The reason I was asking—" Sampson started to say, still keeping his cool.

Goldman cut him off with a rude swipe of the hand. "Let me show you the sites of the stabbings." He turned his attention back to me. "Maybe it will jog something else you know about Soneji."

"Detective Sampson asked you a question," I said.

"Yeah, but it was a pointless question. I don't have time for PC crap or pointless questions. Like I said, let's move on. Soneji is on the loose in my town."

"You know much about knives? You cover a lot of stabbings?" Sampson asked. I could tell that he was starting to lose it. He towered over Manning Goldman. Actually, both of us did.

"Yeah, I've covered quite a few stabbings," Goldman said. "I also know where you're going. It's extremely unlikely for Soneji to kill three out of three with a knife. Well, the knife he used had a double serpentine blade, extremely sharp. He cut each victim like some surgeon from NYU Medical Center. Oh yeah, he tipped the knife with potassium cyanide. Kill you in under a minute. I was getting to that."

Sampson backed off. The mention of poison on the knife was news to us. John knew we needed to hear what Goldman had to say. We couldn't let this get personal here in New York. Not yet anyway.

"Soneji have any history with knives?" Goldman asked. He was talking to me again. "Poisons?"

I understood that he wanted to pump me, to use me. I didn't have a problem with it. Give and take is as good as it gets on most multijurisdictional cases.

"Knives? He once killed an FBI agent with a knife. Poisons? I don't know. I wouldn't be surprised. He also shot an assortment of handguns and rifles while he was growing up. Soneji likes to kill, Detective Goldman. He's a quick study, so he could have picked it up. Guns and knives, and poisons, too."

"Believe me, he did pick it up. He was in and out of here in a couple of minutes. Left three dead bodies just like *that*." Goldman snapped his fingers.

"Was there much blood at the scene?" I asked Goldman. It was the

question I'd had on my mind all the way from Washington.

"There was a *helluva* lot of blood. He cut each victim deep. Slashed two of their throats. Why?"

"There could be an angle connected with all the blood." I told Goldman one of my findings at Union Station. "The sniper in D. C. made a mess. I'm pretty sure Soneji did it on purpose. He used hollow-points. He also left traces of my blood on his weapon," I revealed to Goldman.

He probably even knows I'm here in New York, I thought. And I'm not completely sure who is tracking whom.

CHAPTER 27

same advice to Kyle Craig and the FBI.

"We're going to head back to Washington," I finally told Goldman and Groza. "Thanks for calling us in on this. This helps a lot."

"I'll call if there's anything. You do the same, hey?" Manning Goldman put out his hand, and we shook. "I'm pretty sure we haven't heard the last of Gary Soneji."

I nodded. I was sure of it, too.

CHAPTER 28

pudding. He'd brought an arsenal up onto the observation deck of the limestone tower that soared three hundred feet above the campus, and where he must have felt like God.

Just before he'd gone up in the clock tower, he had murdered his wife and mother. Whitman had made Charlie Starkweather look like a piker and a real chump that afternoon in Texas. The same could be said for Dickie Hickock and Perry Smith, the white-trash punks Truman Capote immortalized in his book *In Cold Blood*. Charles Whitman made those two look like crap, too.

Soneji never forgot the actual passage from the *Time* magazine story on the Texas tower shootings. He knew it word for word: *"Like many mass murderers, Charles Whitman had been an exemplary boy, the kind that neighborhood mothers hold up as a model to their own recalcitrant youngsters. He was a Roman Catholic altar boy, and a newspaper delivery boy."*

Cool goddamn beans.

Another master of disguise, right. Nobody had known what Charlie was thinking, or what he was ultimately going to pull off.

He had carefully positioned himself under the "VI" numeral of the tower's clock. Then Charles Whitman opened fire at 11:48 in the morning. Beside him on the six-foot runway that went around the tower were a machete, a Bowie knife, a 6mm Remington bolt-action rifle, a 35mm Remington, a Luger pistol, and a .357 Smith & Wesson revolver.

The local and state police fired thousands of rounds up onto the tower, almost shooting out the entire face of the clock—but it took over an hour and a half to bring an end to Charlie Whitman. The whole world marveled at his audacity, his unique outlook and perspective. The whole goddamn world took notice.

Someone was pounding on the door of Soneji's hotel room! The sound brought him back to the here and now. He suddenly remembered where he was.

He was in New York City, in Room 419 of the Plaza, which he always used to read about as a kid. He had always fantasized about coming by train to New York and staying at the Plaza. *Well, here he was*.

"Who's out there?" he called from the bed. He pulled a semi-automatic from under the covers. Aimed it at the peephole in the door.

"Maid service," an accented Spanish female voice said. "Would you like your bed turned down?"

"No, I'm comfortable as is," Soneji said and smiled to himself. *Well actually, senorita, I'm preparing to make the NYPD look like the amateurs that cops usually are. You can forget the bed turndown and keep your*

chocolate mints, too. It's too late to try and make up to me now.

On second thought—"Hey! You can bring me some of those chocolate mints. I like those little mints. I need a little sweet treat."

Gary Soneji sat back against the headboard and continued to smile as the maid unlocked the door and entered. He thought about doing her, boffing the scaggy hotel maid, but he figured that wasn't such a good idea. He wanted to spend one night at the Plaza. He'd been looking forward to it for years. It was worth the risk.

The thing that he loved the most, what made it so perfect, was that nobody had any idea where this was going.

Nobody would guess the end to this one.

Not Alex Cross, not anybody.

CHAPTER 29

"Round-trip, it's four hundred ninety-six miles," Damon said.

"You two are… smart!" I exclaimed in a loud, playful voice. "You're both smarty-pants, smart alecks, smarties of the highest order!"

"What's going on in there? What am I missing out on?" Nana finally called from the kitchen, which was overflowing with good smells from her cooking. She doesn't like to miss anything. Ever. To my knowledge, she just about never has.

"G.E. College Bowl," I called out to her.

"You will lose your shirt, Alex, if you play against those two young scholars," she warned. "Their hunger for knowledge knows no bounds. Their knowledge is fast becoming encyclopedic."

"En-cy-clo-pedic!" Jannie grinned.

"Cakewalk!" she said then, and did the lively old dance that had originated back in plantation times. I'd taught it to her one day at the piano. The cakewalk music form was actually a forerunner of modern jazz. It had fused polyrhythms from West Africa with classical melodies and also marches from Europe.

Back in plantation days, whoever did the dance best on a given night won a cake. Thus the phrase "that takes the cake."

All of this Jannie knew, and also how to actually do the damn dance in high style, and with a contemporary twist or two. She can also do James Brown's famous Elephant Walk and Michael Jackson's Moonwalk.

After dinner, we did the dishes and then we had our biweekly boxing lesson in the basement. Damon and Jannie are not only smart, they're tough little weasels. Nobody in school picks on those two. "Brains and a wicked left hook!" Jannie brags to me sometimes. "Hard combination to beat."

We finally retired to the living room after the Wednesday-night fights. Rosie the cat was curled up on Jannie's lap. We were watching a little of the Orioles baseball game on television when Soneji slid into my head again.

Of all the killers I had ever gone up against, he was the scariest. Soneji was single-minded, obsessive, but he was also completely whacked-out, and that's the proper medical term I learned years ago at Johns Hopkins. He had a powerful imagination fueled by anger, and he acted on his fantasies.

Months back, Soneji had called to tell me that he'd left a cat at our house, a little present. He knew that we had adopted her, and loved little Rosie very much. He said that every time I saw Rosie the cat, I should think: *Gary's in the house, Gary is right there*.

I had figured that Gary had seen the stray cat at our house, and just made up a nasty story. Gary loved to lie, especially when his lies

hurt people. That night, though, with Soneji running out of control again, I had a bad thought about Rosie. It frightened the hell out of me.

Gary is in the house. Gary is right here.

I nearly threw the cat out of the house, but that wasn't an option, so I waited until morning to do what had to be done with Rosie. *Goddamn Soneji. What in hell did he want from me? What did he want from my family?*

What could he have done to Rosie before he left her at our house?

CHAPTER 30

“You go over to Admin,” he said. “Kyle Craig wants to see you. Says it’s important. Of course, everything with Kyle is important as hell and can’t wait another second. I know he’s crazed about Mr. Smith. We all are. Smith is the craziest fucker yet, Alex.”

“What happens to Rosie?” I asked.

“First step, some X rays. Hopefully, little Red here isn’t a walking bomb, compliments of our friend Soneji. If she isn’t, we’ll pursue toxicology. Examine her for the presence of drugs or poison in the tissues and fluids. You run along. Go see Uncle Kyle. Red and I will be just fine. I’ll try to do right by her, Alex. We’re all cat people in my family. I’m a cat person, can’t you tell? I understand about these things.”

He nodded his head and then flipped down his swimmer-style goggles. Rosie rubbed up against him, so I figured she knew he was okay. So far, anyway.

It was later that worried me, and almost brought tears to my eyes.

CHAPTER 31

about Mr. Smith. Believe me, Alex, you've never seen anything like this. You've got to be a little curious."

"I'm not. In fact, I'm going to leave now. Walk right out that door I came in."

"We've got an unbelievably ugly problem on our hands, Alex. Just let me talk, and you listen. Just *listen*," Kyle pleaded.

I relented, but just a litte. "I'll listen. That's all. I'm not getting involved with this."

Kyle made a small, ceremonial bow in my direction. "Just listen," Kyle said. "Listen and keep an open mind, Alex. This is going to blow your mind, I guarantee it. It's blown mine."

Then Kyle proceeded to tell me about an agent named Thomas Pierce. Pierce was in charge of the Mr. Smith case. What *was* intriguing was that Smith had brutally murdered Pierce's financée some years back.

"Thomas Pierce is the most thorough investigator and the most brilliant person I've ever met," Kyle told me. "At first, we wouldn't let him anywhere near the Smith case, for obvious reasons. He worked it on his own. He made progress where we hadn't. Finally, he made it clear that if he couldn't work on Smith, he'd leave the Bureau. He even threatened to try and solve the case on his own."

"You put him on the case?" I asked Kyle.

"He's very persuasive. In the end, he made his to the Director. He sold Burns. Pierce is logical, he's creative. He can analyze a problem like nobody I've ever seen. He's been fanatical on Mr. Smith. Works eighteen-and twenty-hour days."

"But even Pierce can't crack this case," I said and pointed at the Big Board.

Kyle nodded. "We're finally getting close, Alex. I desperately need your input. And I want you to meet Thomas Pierce. You have to meet Pierce."

"I said I'd listen," I told Kyle. "But I don't have to meet anyone."

Nearly four hours later, Kyle finally let me out of his clutches. He *had* blown my mind, all right—about Mr. Smith *and* about Thomas Pierce—but I wasn't getting involved. I couldn't.

I finally made my way back to SAS to check on Rosie. Chet Elliott was able to see me right away. He was still wearing his lab coat, gloves, and the gold-tinted goggles. His slow-gaited walk toward me said *bad* news. I didn't want to hear it.

Then he surprised me and grinned. "We don't see anything wrong with her, Alex. I don't think Soneji did anything to her. He was just mind-humping you. We checked her for volatile compounds—nada. Then for nonvolatile organic compounds that would be unusual in her system—also negative. Forensic serology took some blood. You ought

to leave Red with us for a couple of days, but I doubt we'll find anything. You can leave her here, period, if you like. She's really cool cat."

"I know." I nodded and breathed a sigh of relief. "Can I see her?" I asked Chet.

"Sure can. She's been asking for you all morning. I don't know why, but she seems to like you."

"She knows I'm a cool cat, too." I smiled.

He took me back to see Rosie. She was being kept in a small cage, and she looked pissed as hell. I'd brought her here, hadn't I? I might as well have administered the lab tests myself.

"Not my fault," I explained as best I could. "Blame that nutcase Gary Soneji, not me. Don't look at me like that."

She finally let me pick her up and she even nuzzled my cheek. "You're being a very brave good girl," I whispered. "I owe you one, and I always pay my debts."

She purred and finally licked my cheek with her sandpaper tongue. *Sweet lady, Rosie O'Grady*.

CHAPTER 32

CHAPTER 33

that Mr. Smith had used to transport the remains of Chief Inspector Cabot.

"It's as if he's *living* a Gothic novel," Sondra Greenberg said. She was kneeling beside Pierce. Actually, they looked like a team, even like a couple.

"Smith called you here, too—to London? Left a voice mail?" Pierce asked her.

Greenberg nodded. "What do you think of the body? The latest kill? Smith packed the bag with body parts in the most careful and concise way. Like you would if you had to get everything into a suitcase."

Thomas Pierce frowned. "Freak, goddamn butcher."

"Why Piccadilly? A hub of London. Why under Eros?"

"He's leaving clues for us, obvious clues. We just don't understand," Thomas Pierce said and continued to shake his head.

"Right you are, Thomas. Because we don't speak Martian."

Chapter 34

Meredith Murphy wasn't answering her phone that morning, which didn't surprise me.

"I feel sorry for Mrs. Murphy and especially the little girl," I told Sampson as we pulled up in front of the house. "Missy Murphy had no idea who Gary really was."

Sampson nodded. "I remember they seemed nice enough. Maybe too nice. Gary fooled them. Ole Gary the Fooler."

There were lights burning in the house. A white Chevy Lumina was parked in the driveway. The street was as quiet and peaceful as I remembered it from our last visit, when the peacefulness had been short-lived.

We got out of the Porsche and headed toward the front door of the house. I touched the butt of my Glock as we walked. I couldn't help thinking that Soneji could be waiting, setting some kind of trap for Sampson and me.

The neighborhood, the entire town, still reminded me of the 1950s. The house was well kept and looked as if it had recently been painted. That had been part of Gary's careful facade. It was the perfect hiding place: a sweet little house on Central Avenue, with a white picket fence and a stone walkway bisecting the front lawn.

"So what do you figure is going on with Soneji?" Sampson asked as we came up to the front door. "He's changed some, don't you think? He's not the careful planner I remember. More impulsive."

It seemed that way. "Not everything's changed. He's still playing parts, acting. But he's on a rampage like nothing I've seen before. He doesn't seem to care if he's caught. Yet everything he does is planned. He *escapes*."

"And why is that, Dr. Freud?"

"That's what we're here to find out. And that's why we're going to Lorton Prison tomorrow. Something weird is going on, even for Gary Soneji."

I rang the front doorbell. Sampson and I waited for Missy Murphy on the porch. We didn't fit into the small-town-America neighborhood, but that wasn't so unusual. We didn't exactly fit into our own neighborhood back in D.C. either. That morning we were both wearing dark clothes and dark glasses, looking like musicians in somebody's blues band.

"Hmm, no answer," I muttered.

"Lights blazing inside," Sampson said. "Somebody must be here. Maybe they just don't want to talk to Men In Black."

"Ms. Murphy," I called out in a loud voice, in case someone was inside but not answering the door. "Ms. Murphy, open the door. It's Alex Cross from Washington. We're not leaving without talking to you."

"Nobody home at the Bates Motel," Sampson grunted.

He wandered around the side of the house, and I followed close behind. The lawn had been cut recently and the hedges trimmed. Everything looked so neat and clean and so harmless.

I went to the back door, the kitchen, if I remembered. I wondered if he could be hiding inside. Anything was possible with Soneji—the more twisted and unlikely the better for his ego.

Things about my last visit were flashing back. Nasty memories. It was Roni's birthday party. She was seven. Gary Soneji had been inside the house that time, but he had managed to escape. A regular Houdini. A very smart, very creepy creep.

Soneji could be inside now. Why did I have the unsettling feeling that I was walking into a trap?

I waited on the back porch, not sure what to do next. I rang the bell. Something was definitely wrong about the case, everything about it was wrong. Soneji here in Wilmington? Why here? Why kill people in Union and Penn Stations?

"Alex!" Sampson shouted. "Alex! Over here! Come quick. Alex, *now!*"

I hurried across the yard with my heart in my throat. Sampson was down on all fours. He was crouched in front of a doghouse that was painted white and shingled to look like the main residence. What in hell was inside the doghouse?

As I got closer, I could see a thick black cloud of flies.

Then I heard the buzzing.

CHAPTER 35

daughter, Roni. What has he done with her?"

The two of us searched the wooded half lot, including a copse of bent, wind-battered evergreens on the northeast side of the house. No Roni. No other bodies, or grossly severed parts, or other grisly surprises.

We looked for the girl in the two-car garage. Then in the tight, musty crawl space under the back porch. We checked the trio of metal garbage cans neatly lined alongside the garage. Nothing anywhere. Where was Roni Murphy? Had he taken her with him? Had Soneji kidnapped his daughter?

I headed back toward the house, with Sampson a step or two behind me. I broke the window in the kitchen door, unlocked it, and rushed inside. I feared the worst. Another murdered child?

"Go easy, man. Take it slow in here," Sampson whispered from behind. He knew how I got when children were involved. He also sensed this could be a trap Soneji had set. It was a perfect place for one.

"Roni!" I called out. "Roni, are you in here? Roni, can you hear me?"

I remembered her face from the last time I'd been in this house. I could have drawn her picture if I had to.

Gary had told me once that Roni was the only thing that mattered in his life, the only good thing he'd ever done. At the time, I believed him. I was probably projecting my feelings for my own kids. Maybe I was fooled into thinking that Soneji had some kind of conscience and feelings because that was what I wanted to believe.

"Roni! It's the police. You can come out now, honey. Roni Murphy, are you in here? Roni?"

"Roni!" Sampson joined in, his deep voice just as loud as mine, maybe louder.

Sampson and I covered the downstairs, throwing open every door and closet as we went. Calling out her name. Dear God, I was praying now. It was sort of a prayer anyway. *Gary—not your own little girl. You don't have to kill her to show us how bad you are, how angry. We get the message. We understand.*

I ran upstairs, taking the creaking wooden steps two at a time. Sampson was close behind me, a shadow. It usually doesn't show on his face, but he gets as upset as I do. Neither of us is jaded yet.

I could hear it in his voice, in the shallow way he was breathing. "Roni! Are you up here? Are you hiding somewhere?" he called out.

"Roni! It's the police. You're safe now, Roni! You can come out."

Someone had ransacked the master bedroom. Someone had invaded this space, desecrated it, broken every piece of furniture, overturned beds and bureaus.

“You remember her, John?” I asked as we checked the rest of the bedrooms.

“I remember her pretty good,” Sampson said in a soft voice. “Cute little girl.”

“Oh, no—*nooo*—”

Suddenly I was running down the hallway, back down the stairs. I raced through the kitchen and pulled open a hollow-core door between the refrigerator and a four-burner stove.

We both hurried down into the basement, into the *cellar* of the house.

My heart was out of control, *beating, banging, thudding* loudly inside my chest. I didn’t want to be here, to see any more of Soneji’s handiwork, his nasty surprises.

The cellar of his house.

The symbolic place of all Gary’s childhood nightmares.

The cellar.

Blood.

Trains.

The cellar in the Murphy house was small and neat. I looked around. *The trains were gone!* There had been a train set down here the first time we came to the house.

I didn’t see any signs of the girl, though. Nothing looked out of place. We threw open work cabinets. Sampson yanked open the washer, then the clothes dryer.

There was an unpainted wooden door to one side of the water heater and a fiberglass laundry sink. There was no sign of blood in the sink, no bloodstained clothes. Was there a way outside? Had the little girl run away when her father came to the house?

The closet! I yanked open the door.

Roni Murphy was bound with rope and gagged with old rags. Her blue eyes were large with fear. She was alive!

She was shaking badly. He didn’t kill her, but he had killed her childhood, just as his had been killed. A few years before, he had done the same thing with a girl called Maggie Rose.

“Oh, sweet girl,” I whispered as I untied her and took out the cloth gag her father had stuffed into her mouth. “Everything is all right now. Everything is okay, Roni. You’re okay now.”

What I didn’t say was, *Your father loved you enough not to kill you—but he wants to kill everything and everyone else.*

“You’re okay, you’re okay, baby. Everything is okay,” I lied to the poor little girl. “Everything is okay now.”

Sure it is.

CHAPTER 36

a nice cry. Felt real good, too."

"Sorry to intrude," I said as I continued to hold her close.

"I love you, Alex," my grandmother whispered. "Can you still play 'Clair de Lune'? Play Debussy for me."

And so with Nana Mama close beside me, I played.

CHAPTER 37

I could almost feel myself drowning as I paced inside a small administrative room near the warden's office on the fifth floor at Lorton.

I was waiting for a double murderer named Jamal Autry. Autry claimed to have important information about Soneji. He was known inside Lorton as the Real Deal. He was a predator, a three-hundred-pound pimp who had murdered two teenage prostitutes in Baltimore.

The Real Deal was brought to me in restraints. He was escorted into the small, tidy office by two armed guards with billy clubs.

"You Alex Cross? Gah-damn. Now ain't that somethin'," Jamal Autry said with a middle-South twang.

He smiled crookedly when be spoke. The lower half of his face sagged like the mouth and jaw of a bottom feeder. He had strange, uneven piggy eyes that were hard to look at. He continued to smile as if he were about to be paroled today, or had just won the inmates' lottery.

I told the two guards that I wanted to talk to Autry alone. Even though he was in restraints, they departed reluctantly. I wasn't afraid of this big load, though. I wasn't a helpless teenage girl he could beat up on.

"Sorry, I missed the joke," I finally said to Autry. "Don't quite know why it is that you're smiling."

"Awhh, don't worry 'bout it, man. You get the joke okay. Eventually," he said with his slow drawl. "You'll get the joke, Dr. Cross. *See, it's on you.*"

I shrugged. "You asked to see me, Autry. You want something out of this and so do I. I'm not here for your jokes or your private amusement. You want to go back to your cell, just turn the hell around."

Jamal Autry continued to smile, but he sat down on one of two chairs left for us. "We boff want somethin'," he said. He began to make serious eye contact with me. He had the don't-mess-with-me look now. His smile evaporated.

"Tell me what you've got to trade. We'll see where it goes," I said. "Best I can do for you."

"Soneji said you a hard-ass. Smart for a cop. We'll see what we see," he drawled.

I ignored the bullshit that flowed so easily from his overlarge mouth. I couldn't help thinking about the two sixteen-year-old girls he'd murdered. I imagined him smiling at them, too. Giving them the look. "The two of you talked sometimes? Soneji was a friend of yours?" I asked him.

Autry shook his head. The look stayed fixed. His piggy eyes never left mine. "Naw, man. Only talked when he needed somethin'. Soneji

rather sit in his cell, stare out into far space, like Mars or someplace. Soneji got no friends in here. Not me, not anybody else."

Autry leaned forward in his chair. He had something to tell me. Obviously, he thought it was worth a lot. He lowered his voice as if there were someone in the room besides the two of us.

Someone like Gary Soneji, I couldn't help thinking.

CHAPTER 38

just one time either. He wanted Gary to know he was *the man*. He was the one man even crazier than Soneji in here."

I shook my head and leaned forward to listen. He had my attention, but something wasn't tracking for me. "Gary was separated from the prison population. Maximum security. How the hell did Thomas get to him?"

"Gah-damn, I told you, things get done in here. Things always get done. Don't be fooled what you hear on the outside, man. That's the way it is, way it's always been."

I stared into Autry's eyes. "So you took Soneji's money for protection, and Shareef Thomas got to him anyway? There's more, isn't there?"

I sensed that Autry was relishing his own punch line, or maybe he just liked having the power over me.

"There's more, yeah. Shareef gave Gary Soneji the Fever. Soneji has the bug, man. He's dying. Your old friend Gary Soneji is dying. He got *the message* from God."

The news hit me like a sucker punch. I didn't let it show, didn't give away any advantage, but Jamal Autry had just made some sense of everything Soneji had done so far. He had also shaken me to the quick. *Soneji has the Fever. He has AIDS. Gary Soneji is dying. He has nothing to lose anymore.*

Was Autry telling the truth or not? Big question, important question.

I shook my head. "I don't believe you, Autry. Why the hell should I?" I said.

He looked offended, which was part of his act. "Believe what you want. But you *ought* to believe. Gary got the message to me in here. Gary *contacted* me this week, two days ago. Gary let me know he has the Fever."

We had come full circle. Autry knew that he had me from the minute he walked into the room. Now I got to hear the punch line of his joke—the one he'd promised at the start. First, though, I had to be his straight man for a little while longer.

"Why? Why would he tell you he's dying?" I played my part.

"Soneji said you'd come here asking questions. He knew you were coming. He knows you, man—better than you know him. Soneji wanted me to give you the message personally. He gave me the message, just for you. *He said to tell you that.*"

Jamal Autry smiled his crooked smile again. "What do you say now, Dr. Cross? You get what you come here for?"

I had what I needed all right. Gary Soneji was dying. He wanted me to follow him into hell. He was on a rampage with nothing to lose, nothing to fear from anyone.

CHAPTER 39

"Sugar Puffs and milk are good. Curl up in bed with a movie or book. Nothing wrong with that."

"That was my plan. I finally gave in and started *The Horse Whisperer*. I'm glad you called and spoiled it for me, took me out of my own twilight zone."

"You must really think I'm crazy," Christine said and smiled a little later during dinner. "Lawdy, Miss Clawdy, I believe I *am* crazy."

I laughed. "For going out with me? Absolutely crazy."

"No, for telling you I didn't think we should see each other, and now late dinner at Georgia Brown's. Forsaking my Sugar Puffs and *Horse Whisperer*."

I looked into her eyes, and I wanted to stay right there for a very long time, at least until Georgia Brown's asked us to leave. "What happened? What changed?" I asked.

"I stopped being afraid," she said, "Well, almost stopped. But I'm getting there."

"Yeah, maybe we both are. I was afraid, too."

"That's nice to hear. I'm glad you told me. I couldn't imagine that you get afraid."

I drove Christine home from Georgia Brown's around midnight. As we rode on the John Hansen Highway, all I could think about was touching her hair, stroking the side of her cheek, maybe a few other things. Yes, definitely a few other things.

I walked Christine to her front door and I could hardly breathe. Again. My hand was lightly on her elbow. She had her house key clasped in her hand.

I could smell her perfume. She told me it was called Gardenia Passion, and I liked it a lot. Our shoes softly scraped the cement.

Suddenly, Christine turned and put her arms around me. The movement was graceful, but she took me by surprise.

"I have to find something out," she said.

Christine kissed me, just as we had a few days before. We kissed sweetly at first, then harder. Her lips were soft and moist against mine, then firmer, more urgent. I could feel her breasts press against me; then her stomach, her strong legs.

She opened her eyes, looked at me, and she smiled. I loved that natural smile—loved it. *That smile—no other one*.

She gently pulled herself away from me. I felt the separation and I didn't want her to go. I sensed, I knew, I should leave it at that.

Christine opened her front door and slowly backed inside. I didn't want her to go in just yet. I wanted to know what she was thinking, all her thoughts.

"The first kiss wasn't an accident," she whispered.

"No, it wasn't an accident," I said.

CHAPTER 40

He was several steps ahead of everybody else.
He was way ahead.
As always.

Chapter 41

This particular house was dangerous—which was why the game was so much fun, such a mind trip.

The bedroom door was slightly ajar. Soneji slowly, patiently, inched it open.

He heard a man softly snoring. He saw another digital clock on a bedside table. *Three-twenty-three*. He had *lost* time.

He rose to his full height. He was finally out of the cellar, and he felt an incredible surge of anger now. He felt rage, and it was justified.

Gary Soneji angrily sprang forward at the figure in bed. He clasped a metal pipe tightly in both his hands. He raised it like an ax. He swung the pipe down as hard as he could.

"Detective Goldman, so nice to meet you," he whispered.

CHAPTER 42

Riverdale was the site of Manhattan College, a small private school having no affiliation with either Manhattan or the Bronx. New York's mayor, Rudy Giuliani, had attended Manhattan, Groza said.

I listened to the detective's idle chitchat until I felt he had talked himself out. He seemed a different man from the one I'd met earlier in the week at Penn Station when he was partnered with Manning Goldman.

"Are you okay?" I finally asked him. I had never lost a partner, but I had come close with Sampson. He had been stabbed in the back. That happened in North Carolina, of all places. My niece, Naomi, had been kidnapped. I have counseled detectives who have lost partners, and it's never an easy thing.

"I didn't really like Manning Goldman," Groza admitted, "but I respected things he did as a detective. No one should die the way he did."

"No, no one should die like that," I agreed. *No one was safe*. Not the wealthy, certainly not the poor, and not even the police. It was a continuing refrain in my life, the scariest truth of our age.

We finally turned off the crowded Deegan Expressway and got onto an even busier, much noisier Broadway. Detective Groza was clearly shook up that morning. I didn't show it, but so was I.

Gary Soneji was showing us how easy it was for him to get into a cop's home.

CHAPTER 43

The detective's body had already been removed from the house, and I didn't like arriving at the murder scene so late. Several NYPD techies were working the room. *Goldman's blood was everywhere*. It was splattered on the bed, the walls, the beige-carpeted floor, the desk and bookcases, and even on a gold menorah. I already knew why Soneji was so interested in spilling blood now—his blood was deadly.

I could feel Gary Soneji here in Goldman's room, *I could see him*, and it stunned me that I could imagine his presence so strongly, physically and emotionally. I remembered a time when Soneji had entered my home in the night and with a knife. *Why would he come here?* I wondered. *Was he warning me, playing with my head?*

"He definitely wanted to make a high-profile statement," I muttered, more to myself than to Carmine Groza. "He knew that Goldman was running the case in New York. He's showing us that he's in complete control."

There was something else, though. There had to be more to this than I was seeing so far. I paced around the bedroom. I noticed that the computer on the desk was turned on.

I spoke to one of the techies, a thin man with a small, grim mouth. Perfect for homicide scenes. "The computer was on when they found Detective Goldman?" I asked.

"Yeah. The Mac was on. It's been dusted."

I glanced at Groza. "We know he's looking for Shareef Thomas, and that Thomas was originally from New York. He's supposed to be back here now. Maybe he made Goldman pull up Thomas's file before he killed him."

For once Detective Groza didn't answer. He was quiet and unresponsive. I wasn't completely certain myself. Still, I trusted my instincts, especially when it came to Soneji. I was following in his bloody footsteps and I didn't think I was too far behind.

CHAPTER 44

myself said, 'Good show.'"

I laughed out loud into the phone receiver. "I'm sorry about missing the boxing lesson with you two pit bulls. Sorry, sorry, sorry," I said in a bluesy, singsong voice. "Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry."

"That's what you *always* say," Jannie whispered, and I could hear the crackle of hurt in her voice. "Someday, it's not going to work anymore. Mark my words. Remember where you heard it first. Remember, remember, remember."

I took her counsel to heart in the lonely New York City hotel room as I ate a room-service burger and looked out over Times Square. I remembered an old joke among shrinks: "Schizophrenia beats eating alone." I thought about my kids, and about Christine Johnson, and then about Soneji and Manning Goldman, murdered in his own house. I tried to read a few pages of *Angela's Ashes*, which I'd packed in my bag. I couldn't handle the beautifully described Limerick ghetto that night.

I called Christine when I thought I had my head screwed on straight. We talked for almost an hour. Easy, effortless talk. Something was changing between us. I asked her if she wanted to spend some time together that weekend, maybe in New York if I still had to be here. It took some nerve for me to ask. I wondered if she could hear it in my voice.

Christine surprised me again. She wanted to come to New York. She laughed and said she could do some early Christmas shopping in July, but I had to *promise* to make time for her.

I promised.

I must have slept some finally, because I woke in a strange bed, in a stranger town, wrapped in my bedsheets as if I were trapped in a straitjacket.

I had a strange, discomforting thought. Gary Soneji is tracking *me*. It's not the other way round.

CHAPTER 45

notice me, they seemed to plead.

He chatted up a pair of lady lawyers who, unfortunately, were joined at the hip. They reminded him of the strange girls in the French movie *La Cérémonie*. He learned that Theresa and Jessie had been roommates for the past eleven years. Jesus! They were both thirty-six. Their clocks were ticking very loudly. They worked out religiously at the Vertical Club on Sixty-first Street. Summered in Bridgehampton, a mile from the water. They were all wrong for him and, apparently, for everyone else at the bar.

Soneji moved on. He was starting to feel a little pressure. The police knew he was using disguises. Only not what he might look like on a given day. Yesterday, he was a dark-haired Spanish-looking man in his mid-forties. Today, he was blond, bearded, and fit right in at Tatou. Tomorrow, who knew? He could make a dumb mistake, though. He could be picked up and everything would end.

He met an advertising art director, a creative director in a large ad factory on Lexington Avenue. Jean Summerhill was originally from Atlanta, she told him. She was small and very slim, with blond hair, lots of it. She wore a single trendy braid down one side, and he could tell she was full of herself. In an odd way, she reminded him of his Meredith, his Missy. Jean Summerhill had her own place, a condo. She lived alone, in the Seventies.

She was too pretty to be in here alone, looking for company in all the wrong places, but Soneji understood why once they'd talked: Jean Summerhill was too smart, too strong and individualistic for most men. She scared men off without meaning to, or even knowing that she had.

She didn't scare him, though. They talked easily, the way strangers sometimes do at a bar. Nothing to lose, nothing to risk. She was very down-to-earth. A woman with a need to be seen as "nice"; unlucky in love, though. He told her that and, since it was what she wanted to hear, Jean Summerhill seemed to believe him.

"You're easy to talk to," she said over their third or fourth drink. "You're very calm. Centered, right?"

"Yeah, I am a little boring," Soneji said. He knew he was anything but that. "Maybe that's why my wife left me. Missy fell for a rich man, her boss on Wall Street. We both cried the night that she told me. Now she lives in a big apartment over on Beekman Place. Real fancy digs." He smiled. "We're still friends. I just saw Missy recently."

Jean looked into his eyes. There was something sad about the look. "You know what I like about you," she said, "it's that you're not afraid of me."

Gary Soneji smiled. "No, I guess I'm not."

"And I'm not afraid of you either," Jean Summerhill whispered.

“That’s the way it should be,” Soneji said. “Just don’t lose your head over me. Promise?”

“I’ll do my best.”

The two of them left Tatou and went to her condo together.

CHAPTER 46

Soneji might show up.

I slid down into a corner of the front seat. In the distance, I could see a peeling billboard high above a red-brick building: COP SHOT $10,000 REWARD. Not a good omen, but a fair warning.

The neighborhood began to wake up and show its character around nine or so. A couple of elderly women in blousy white dresses walked hand in hand toward the Pentecostal church up the street. They made me think of Nana and her buddies back in D.C. Made me miss being home for the weekend, too.

A girl of six or seven was playing jump rope down the street. I noticed she was using salvaged electrical wire. She moved in a kind of listless trance.

It made me sad to watch the little sweetheart play. I wondered what would become of her? What chance did she have to make it out of here? I thought of Jannie and Damon and how they were probably "disappointed" in me for being away on Saturday morning. *Saturday is our day off, Daddy. We only have Saturdays and Sundays to be together*.

Time passed slowly. It almost always does on surveillance. I had a thought about the neighborhood—*tragedy can be addictive, too*. A couple of suspicious–looking guys in sleeveless T-shirts and cutoff shorts pulled up in an unmarked black truck around ten-thirty. They set up shop, selling watermelons, corn on the cob, tomatoes, and collard greens on the street. The melons were piled high in the scummy gutter.

It was almost eleven o'clock now and I was worried. Our information might be wrong. Paranoia was starting to run a little wild in my head. Maybe Gary Soneji had already visited the crackhouse. He was good at disguises. He might even be in there now.

I opened the car door and got out. The heat rushed at me and I felt as if I were stepping into a blast oven. Still, it was good to be out of the car, the cramped quarters.

"What are you doing?" Groza asked. He seemed prepared to sit in the car all day, playing everything by the book, waiting for Soneji to show.

"Trust me," I said.

CHAPTER 47

It looked as if Shareef Thomas had definitely fallen down a few notches. If he was here, he was hanging with the low end of the low. Was Shareef dying? Or just hiding? Did he know Soneji might be looking for him?

"What do you want, chief?" the Latino man asked in a low grumble. His eyes were thin slits.

"Little peace and quiet," I said. I kept it respectful. As if this were church, which it was for some people.

I handed him two crumpled bills and he turned away with the money. "In there," he said.

I looked past him into the main room, and I felt as if a hand were clutching my heart and squeezing it tight.

About ten or twelve men and a couple of women were sitting or sprawled on the floor and on a few soiled, incredibly thin mattresses. The pipeheads were mostly staring into space, doing nothing, and doing it well. It was as if they were slowly fading or evaporating into the smoke and dust.

No one noticed me, which was okay, which was good. Nobody much cared who came or left this hell-hole. I still hadn't spotted Shareef. Or Soneji.

It was as dark as a moonless night in the main room of the crackhouse. No lights except for an occasional match being struck. The sound of the match-head strike, then a long, extended hiss.

I was looking for Thomas, but I was also carefully playing my part. Just another strung-out junkie pipehead. Looking for a spot to smoke, to nod out in peace, not here to bother anyone.

I spotted Shareef Thomas on one of the mattresses, near the rear of the dark, dingy room. I recognized him from pictures I'd studied at Lorton. *I forced my eyes away from him*.

My heart started to pump like crazy. Could Soneji be here, too? Sometimes he seemed like a phantom or ghost to me. I wondered if there was a door back out. I had to find a place to sit down before Thomas became suspicious.

I made it to a wall and started to slide down to the floor. I watched Shareef Thomas out of the corner of my eye. Then all kinds of unexpected madness and chaos broke out inside the crackhouse.

The front door was thrown open and Groza and two uniforms burst in. So much for trust. "Muhfucker," a man near me woke up and moaned in the smoky shadows.

"Police! Don't move!" Carmine Groza yelled. "Nobody move. Everybody stay cool!" He sounded like a street cop anyway.

My eyes stayed glued to Shareef Thomas. He was already getting up off the mattress, where he'd been content as a cat just a few seconds ago. Maybe he wasn't stoned at all. Maybe he was hiding.

I grabbed for the Glock under my rolled-up shirt, tucked at the small of my back. I brought it around in front of me. I hoped against hope I wouldn't have to use it in these close quarters.

Thomas raised a shotgun that must have been hidden alongside his mattress. The other pipeheads seemed unable to move and get out of the way. Every red-rimmed eye in the room was opened wide with fear.

Thomas's Street Sweeper exploded! Groza and the uniformed cops hit the floor, all three of them. I couldn't tell if anyone had been hit up front.

The Latino at the door yelled, "Cut this shit out! Cut the shit!" He was down low on the floor himself, screaming without raising his head into the line of fire.

"Thomas!" I yelled at the top of my voice.

Shareef Thomas was moving with surprising speed and alertness. Quick, sure reflexes, even under the influence. He turned the shotgun on me. His dark eyes glared.

There is nothing to compare with the sight of a shotgun pointed right at you. I had no choice now. I squeezed the trigger of the Glock.

Shareef Thomas took a thunderbolt in his right shoulder. He spun hard left, but he didn't go down. He pivoted smoothly. He'd been here before. So had I.

I fired a second time, hit him in the throat or lower jaw. Thomas flew back and crashed into the paper-thin walls. The whole building shook. His eyeballs flipped back and his mouth sagged open wide. He was gone before he hit the crackhouse floor.

I had killed our only connection to Gary Soneji.

CHAPTER 48

Groza nodded. “Let me talk to somebody downtown. Maybe we could take Thomas to a hospital. Maybe we could get the word to the press. It’s worth a shot.”

Detective Groza didn’t sound very good and he didn’t look too good. I was sure I didn’t either. I could still see the ominous billboard in the distance: COP SHOT $10,000 REWARD.

CHAPTER 49

could feel the rage surging as he walked the overcrowded streets. He almost couldn't see straight. Bile rose in his throat.

He flung his coffee, almost a full cup of the steamy liquid, at a passing businessman. He laughed right in the shocked, outraged face. He howled at the sight of coffee dripping from the New Yorker's aquiline nose, his squarish chin. Dark coffee stained the expensive shirt and tie.

Gary Soneji could do anything he wanted to, and most often, he did.

Just you watch.

CHAPTER 50

you. New York scares me a little, but here I am."

"We're going to have a great time. You'll see."

"You promise? Will it be unforgettable?" she teased me.

"Unforgettable, I promise," I said.

I held her tightly in my arms. I couldn't let her go.

Chapter 51

anywhere I've been," Christine said once we were seated. "That's about all the superlatives you're going to hear from me tonight."

"You haven't even seen me dance," I said.

"I already know that you can dance." Christine laughed and told me, "Women always know which men can dance, and which men can't."

We ordered drinks, straight Scotch for me, Harvey's sherry for Christine. We picked out a bottle of sauvignon blanc, and then spent a few delicious minutes just taking in the spectacle of the Rainbow Room.

The Latin combo was replaced by a "big band combo," which played swing and even took a swipe at the blues. A whole lot of people still knew how to jitterbug and waltz and even tango, and some of them were pretty good.

"You ever been here before?" I asked Christine as the waiter came with our drinks.

"Only while I was watching *The Prince of Tides* alone in my bedroom at home," she said, and smiled again. "How about you? Come here often, sailor?"

"Just the one time I was chasing down this split-personality ax murderer in New York. He went right out that picture window over there. Third from the left."

Christine laughed. "I wouldn't be surprised if it was true, Alex. I wouldn't be a bit surprised."

The band started to play "Moonglow," which is a pretty song, and we had to get up and dance. Gravity just pulled us. At that moment, I couldn't think of too many things in the world I wanted to do more than hold Christine in my arms. Actually, I couldn't think of anything at all.

At some point in time, Christine and I had agreed to take a risk and see what would happen. We'd both lost people we loved. We knew what it meant to be hurt, and yet here we were, ready to go out on the dance floor of life again. I think I'd wanted to slow-dance with Christine from the very first time I saw her at the Sojourner Truth School.

Now, I tucked her in close and my left arm encircled her waist. My right hand clasped hers. I felt her soft intake of breath. I could tell she was a little nervous, too.

I started to hum softly. I might have been floating a little, too. My lips touched hers and my eyes closed. I could feel the silk of her dress under my fingers. And yes, I could dance pretty well, but so could she.

"Look at me," she whispered, and I opened my eyes. She was right. It was much better that way.

"What's going on here? What *is* this? I don't think I've ever felt

like this, Alex."

"Neither have I. But I could get used to it. I know that I like it."

I lightly brushed her cheek with my fingers. The music was working and Christine seemed to flow with me. Graceful, moonlit choreography. All my body parts were moving. I was finding it hard to breathe.

Christine and I were in harmony together. We both could dance well enough, but together it was something special. I moved slowly and smoothly with her. The palm of her hand felt magnetized to mine. I spun her slowly, a playful half turn underneath my arm.

We came back together and our lips were inches apart. I could feel the warmth of her body right through my clothes. Our lips met again, just for an instant, and the music stopped. Another song began.

"Now *that* is a hard act to follow," she said as we sashayed back to our table after the slow dance. "I knew you could dance. Never a doubt in my mind. But I didn't know you could *dance*."

"You haven't seen anything. Wait until they play a samba," I told her. I was still holding her hand, couldn't let go. Didn't want to.

"I *think* I can samba," she said.

We danced a lot, we held hands constantly, and I think we even ate dinner. We definitely danced some more, and I could not let go of Christine's hand. She couldn't let go of mine. We talked nonstop, and later, I couldn't remember most of what had been said. I think that happens high above New York City in the Rainbow Room.

The first time I looked at my watch all night it was nearly one o'clock and I couldn't believe it. That same mysterious time-loss thing had happened a couple of times when I'd been with Christine. I paid our bill, our *big* bill, and I noticed that the Rainbow Room was nearly empty. Where had everybody gone?

"Can you keep a secret?" Christine whispered as we were going down to the lobby in the walnut-paneled elevator. We were alone in the car with its soft yellow light. I was holding her in my arms.

"I keep lots of secrets," I said.

"Well, here it is," Christine said as we reached the bottom floor with just the lightest *bump*. She held me inside after the door had opened. She wasn't going to let me out of the softly lit elevator until she finished saying what she had to say.

"I really like that you got me my own room at the Astor," she said. "But Alex, I don't think I'll be needing it. Is that okay?"

We stood very still in the elevator and began to kiss again. The doors shut, and the elevator slowly climbed back up to the roof. So we kissed going up, and we kissed on the way back down to the lobby, and it wasn't nearly a long enough round-trip.

"You know what, though?" she finally said as we reached the

ground floor of Rockefeller Center a second time.

"What, though?" I asked her.

"That's what's *supposed* to happen when you go to the Rainbow Room."

CHAPTER 52

the twelfth floor, facing out on the river.

We were drawn to the picture window, attracted by the strobing lights of the New York skyline to the southeast. We watched the silent, strangely beautiful movement of traffic passing the United Nations, moving toward the Brooklyn Bridge.

I remembered taking the bridge earlier today on our way to a crackhouse in Brooklyn. It seemed so long ago. I saw the face of Shareef Thomas, then the dead policeman's then Soneji's, but I shut down those images immediately. I wasn't a police detective here. Christine's lips were on my skin, lightly bussing my throat.

"Where did you go just now? You went away, didn't you?" she whispered. "You were in a dark place."

"Just for a few seconds." I confessed the truth, my flaw. "A flashback from work. It's gone." I was holding her hand again.

She kissed me lightly on the cheek, a paper-thin kiss, then very lightly on the lips. "You can't lie, can you, Alex? Not even tiny white lies."

"I try not to. I don't like lies. If I lie to you, then who am I?" I said and smiled. "What's the point?"

"I love that about you," she whispered. "Lots of other things, too. I find something else every time I'm with you."

I nuzzled the top of her head, then I kissed Christine's forehead, her cheek, her lips, and finally the sweet hollow of her throat. She was trembling a little. So was I. Thank God that neither of us was afraid, right. I could feel the pulse tripping under her skin.

"You're so beautiful," I whispered. "Do you know that?"

"I'm way too tall, too thin. *You're* the beautiful one. You are, you know. Everybody says so."

Everything felt electric and so right. It seemed a miracle that we had found each other, and now we were here together. I was so glad, felt so lucky, that she had decided to take a chance with me, that I had taken a chance, too.

"Look in the mirror there. See how beautiful you are," she said. "You have the sweetest face. You *are* trouble, though, aren't you, Alex?"

"I won't give you too much trouble tonight," I said.

I wanted to undress her, to do everything for and to Christine. A funny word, strange word was in my head, *rapture*. She slid her hand over the front of my pants and felt how hard I was.

"Hmmm," she whispered and smiled.

I began to unzip her dress. I couldn't remember wanting to be with someone like this, not for a long time anyway. I ran my hand over her face, memorizing every part, every feature. Christine's skin was so soft and silky underneath my fingers.

We started to dance again, right there in the hotel room. There wasn't any music, but we had our own. My hand pressed just below her waist, folding her in close to me.

Moonlit choreography again. We slowly rocked back and forth, back and forth, a sensuous cha-cha-cha next to the broad picture window. I held her buttocks in the palms of my hands. She wiggled into a position she liked. I liked it, too. A whole lot.

"You dance real good, Alex. I just knew you would."

Christine reached down and tugged at my belt until the prong came free. She unzipped me, lightly fondled me. I loved her touch, anywhere, everywhere. Her lips were on my skin again. Everything about her was erotic, irresistible, unforgettable.

We both knew to do this slowly, no need to hurry anything tonight. Rushing would spoil this, and it mustn't be spoiled in any way.

I held the thought that we'd both been here before, but never like this. We were in this very special place for the first time. This would only happen one time.

My kisses slowly swept over her shoulders and I could feel her breasts rising and falling against me. I felt the flatness of her stomach, and her legs pressing. I cupped Christine's breasts in my hands. Suddenly I wanted everything, all of her at once.

I sank to my knees. I ran my hands up and down her soft legs, along her waist.

I rose to my feet. I unzipped her black sheath the rest of the way, and it trailed down her long arms to the floor. It made a shimmering black puddle surrounding her ankles, her slender feet.

Finally, when there were no more clothes, we looked at each other. Christine watched my eyes and I watched hers. Her eyes shamelessly traveled down my chest, past my waist. I was still highly aroused. I wanted to be inside her so much.

She took a half step back. I couldn't breathe. I could hardly bear this. But I didn't want to stop. I was feeling again, remembering how to feel, remembering how good it could be.

She pulled her hair to one side, behind one ear. Such a simple, graceful movement.

"Do that again." I smiled.

She laughed and repeated the movement with her hair. "Anything that you want."

"Stay there," she whispered. "Don't move, Alex. Don't come closer —we might both catch fire. I mean it."

"This could take the rest of the weekend," I said and started to laugh.

"I hope it does."

I heard the tiniest *click*.
Was that the door to our room?
Had I closed it?
Was someone out there?
Jesus, no.

CHAPTER 53

this bed with this woman.

Gracefully and athletically, she rolled on top of me and sat up proud and tall. We began to rock slowly like that. I felt our bodies surge and peak, surge and peak, surge.

I heard my own voice crying yes, yes, yes. Then I realized it was both our voices.

Then Christine said something so magical. She whispered, *"You're the one."*

Part Three

CHAPTER 54

Her work's not bad, but not good enough, I'm afraid."

"Get the hell away from me."

Abel Sante quickened his pace. He was only a block from his home. The other man, the street person, kept up with him easily. He was larger, more athletic than Sante had noticed at first.

"You should have given her babies. That's my opinion."

"Get away. Go!"

Suddenly, Sante had both fists raised and clasped tightly. This was insane! He was ready to fight, if he had to. He hadn't fought in twenty years, but he was strong and in good shape.

The street person swung out and knocked him down. He did it easily, as if it were nothing at all.

Dr. Sante's pulse was racing rapidly. He couldn't see very well out of his left eye, where he'd been struck.

"*Are you a complete maniac? Are you out of your mind?*" he screamed at the man, who suddenly looked powerful and impressive, even in the soiled clothes.

"Yes, of course," the man answered. "Of course I'm out of my mind. *I'm Mr. Smith*—and you're next."

CHAPTER 55

were what they looked like—slow-moving, slow-thinking hospital morons.

One of them was pushing around a stainless-steel cart with *two* bum wheels. It was a wonder that any patient ever made it out of a New York City hospital alive. Hospitals here were run with about the same personnel standards as a McDonald's restaurant, probably less.

He knew one patient who wasn't going to leave Bellevue alive. The news reports said that Shareef Thomas was being kept here by the police. Well, Thomas was going to suffer before he left this so-called "vale of tears." Shareef was about to undergo a world of suffering.

Gary Soneji stepped out of the elevator onto the first floor. He sighed with relief. The two porters went about their business. They weren't cops. No, they were dumber and dumbest.

Canes, wheelchairs, and metal walkers were everywhere. The hospital artifacts reminded him of his own mortality. The halls on the first floor were painted off-white, the doors and radiators were a shade of pink like "old gum." Up ahead was a strange coffee shop, dimly lit like a subway passageway. *If you ate in that place*, he thought to himself, *they ought to lock you up in Bellevue!*

As he walked from the elevator, Soneji caught his own reflection in a stainless-steel pillar. *The master of a thousand faces*, he couldn't help thinking. It was true. His own stepmother wouldn't recognize him now, and if she did, she would scream her bloody lungs out. She'd know he'd come all the way to hell to get her.

He walked down the corridor, singing very softly in a reggae lilt, "I shot the Shareef, but I did not shoot the dep-u-tee."

No one paid him any mind. Gary Soneji fit right in at Bellevue.

CHAPTER 56

being kept. His room was at the far end of the building. Isolated for safety, right? So this was the high-and-mighty NYPD in action. What a joke. Everything was a joke, if you thought about it long and hard enough.

Soneji lowered his head and started to walk toward Shareef Thomas's hospital room.

CHAPTER 57

seemed to catch fire.

For a second or two, I was blinded. Then I felt as if I were burning up. My trousers and shoes were engulfed in flames. I covered my face, mouth, and eyes with my hands. “Jesus, God,” Groza screamed.

I could hear a sizzle, like bacon on a grill. I prayed it wasn’t me that was cooking. Then I was choking and gurgling and so was Groza. Flames burst and danced across my shirt, and through it all I could hear Soneji. He was laughing at us.

“Welcome to hell, Cross,” he said. “Burn, baby, burn.”

CHAPTER 58

awning, smoking cigarettes. They seemed unaware of the emergency situation, or maybe these workers were just used to them. The brick path leading away from the building was crowded with more pedestrians coming and going in the downpour. The umbrellas were blocking my vision.

Where the hell had Gary Soneji gone? Where could he have disappeared to? I had the sinking feeling that I'd lost him again. I couldn't stand any more of this.

Out on First Avenue, food vendors under colorful umbrellas stained with dirt were peddling gyros, hot dogs, and New York-style pretzels.

No Soneji anywhere.

I kept searching, frantically looking up and down the busy, noisy street. I couldn't let him get away. I would never get another chance as good as this. There was an opening in the crowd. I could see for maybe half a block.

There he was!

Soneji was moving with a small clique of pedestrians headed north on the sidewalk. I started to go after him. Groza was still with me. We both had our weapons out. We couldn't risk a shot in the crowds, though. Lots of mothers and children and elderly people, patients coming and going from the hospital.

Soneji peered to the left, the right, and then behind. He saw us coming. I was sure he'd seen me.

He was improvising his escape, a way out of the extreme and dangerous mess. The sequence of recent events showed deterioration in his thinking. He was losing his sharpness and clarity. *That's why he's ready to die now. He's tired of dying slowly. He's losing his mind. He can't bear it.*

A Con Ed crew had blocked off half the intersection. Hard hats bobbed in the rain. Traffic was trying to maneuver around the roadwork, nonstop honkers everywhere.

I saw Soneji make a sudden break from the crowd. What the hell? He was running toward First Avenue, racing down the slippery street. He was weaving, running in a full sprint.

I watched as Gary Soneji spun quickly to his right. *Do us all a favor. Go down!* He ran along the side of a white and blue city bus that had stopped for passengers.

He was still slipping, sliding. He almost fell. Then he was inside the goddamn bus.

The bus was standing-room only. I could see Soneji frantically waving his arms, screaming orders at the other passengers. *Jesus, God, he's got a bomb on that city bus*.

CHAPTER 59

angry circles.

I leaned as far as I could outside the car. “Gary!” I yelled. “What do you want?” I called out again, fighting the traffic noise, the loud roar of the bus. “*Gary! It’s Alex Cross!*”

Passengers inside the bus were looking out at me. They were terrified, beyond terror, actually.

At Forty-second Street and First, the bus made a sudden, sweeping left turn!

I looked at Groza. “This the regular route?”

“No way,” he said. “He’s making his own route up as he goes.”

“What’s on Forty-second Street? What’s up ahead? Where the hell could he be going?”

Groza threw up his hands in desperation. “Times Square is across town, home of the skells, the city’s worst derelicts and losers. Theater district’s there, too. Port Authority Bus Terminal. We’re coming up on Grand Central Station.”

“Then he’s going to Grand Central,” I told Groza. “I’m sure of it. This is the way he wants it. In a train station!” Another cellar, a glorious one that went on for city blocks. *The cellar of cellars*.

Gary Soneji was already out of the bus and running on Forty-second Street. He was headed toward Grand Central Station, headed toward home. He was still carrying the baby in one arm, swinging it loosely, showing us how little he cared about the child’s life.

Goddamn him to hell. He was on the homestretch, and only he knew what that meant.

CHAPTER 60

purchased the knife he'd used in Penn Station.

Detective Groza and I reached the next level. We entered a spacious arcade, surrounded by more railway-track doorways. Signs pointed the way to the subways, to the Times Square Shuttle.

Groza had a two-way cupped near his ear. He was getting up-to-the-second reports from around the station. "He's down in the tunnels. We're close," he told me.

Groza and I raced down another steep deck of stone steps. We ran side by side. It was unbearably hot down below and we were sweating. The building was vibrating. The gray stone walls and the floor shook beneath our feet. We were in hell now, the only question was, which circle?

I finally saw Gary Soneji up ahead. Then he disappeared again. He still had the baby, or maybe it was just the pink-and-blue blanket puffed in his arms.

He was back in sight. Then he *stopped* suddenly. Soneji turned and stared down the tunnel. He wasn't afraid of anything anymore. I could see it in his eyes.

"Dr. Cross," he yelled. "You follow directions beautifully."

Chapter 61

CHAPTER 62

as if he were playing a theater-in-the-round. “You’d all like to kill me. You’re all killers, too!” he screeched.

Soneji did another slow spin around, his gun pointed out, the baby cradled in his left arm. The infant wasn’t crying, and that worried me sick. The bomb could be in a pocket of his trousers. It was somewhere. I hoped it wasn’t in the baby’s blanket.

“You’re back there in the cellar? Aren’t you?” I said. At one time I had believed Gary Soneji was schizophrenic. Then I was certain that he wasn’t. Right now, I wasn’t sure of anything.

He gestured with his free arm at the underground caverns. He continued to walk slowly toward the rear of the platform. We couldn’t stop him. “As a kid, this is where I always dreamed I would escape to. Take a big, fast train to Grand Central Station in New York City. Get away clean and free. *Escape* from everything.”

“You’ve done it. You finally won. Isn’t that why you led us here? To catch you?” I said.

“I’m *not* done. Not even close. I’m not finished with you yet, Cross,” he sneered.

There was his threat again. It made my stomach drop to hear him talk like that. “What about me?” I called. “You keep making threats. I don’t see any action.”

Soneji stopped moving. He stopped backing toward the rear of the platform. Everyone was watching him now, probably thinking none of this was real. I wasn’t even sure if I did.

“This doesn’t end here, Cross. *I’m coming for you*, even from the grave if I have to. There’s no way you can stop this. You remember that! Don’t you forget now! I’m sure you won’t.”

Then Soneji did something I would never understand. His left arm shot up. He threw the baby high in the air. The people watching gasped as the child tumbled forward.

They sighed audibly as a man fifteen feet down the platform caught the baby perfectly.

Then, the infant started to cry.

“Gary, no!” I shouted at Soneji. He was running again.

“Are you ready to die, Dr. Cross?” he screamed back at me. *“Are you ready?”*

CHAPTER 63

echoed off the walls. Nobody was hurrying to catch up with Soneji in the dark, dingy tunnel.

The brakes of a train screeched on the other side of the blackened stone walls. The subway was down here, just parallel to us. There was a stench of garbage and waste that kept getting worse the farther we walked.

I knew that street people lived in some of these tunnels. The NYPD had a Homeless Unit to deal with them.

"Anything there?" Groza muttered, fear and uncertainty in his voice. "You see anything?"

"Nothing." I whispered. I didn't want to make any more noise than we had to. I sucked in another harsh breath. I heard a train whistle on the other side of the stone walls.

There was dim light in parts of the tunnel. A scrim of garbage was underfoot, discarded fast-food wrappers, torn and grossly soiled clothing. I had already seen a couple of oversized rats scurrying alongside my feet, out food shopping in the Big Apple.

Then I heard a scream right on top of me. My neck and back stiffened. It was Groza! He went down. I had no idea what had hit him. He didn't make another sound, didn't move on the tunnel floor.

I whirled around. Couldn't see anyone at first. The darkness seemed to swirl.

I caught a flash of Soneji's face. One eye and half his mouth in dark profile. He hit me before I could get the Glock up. Soneji screamed—a brutal, primal yell. No recognizable words.

He hit me with tremendous power. A punch to the left temple. I remembered how incredibly strong he was, and how crazy he had become. My ears rang, and my head was spinning. My legs were wobbly. He'd almost taken me out with the first punch. Maybe he could have. But he wanted to punish me, wanted his revenge, his payback.

He screamed again—this time inches from my face.

Hurt him back, I told myself. *Hurt him now, or you won't get another chance.*

Soneji's strength was as brutal as it had been the last time we met, especially fighting in close like this. He had me wrapped in his arms and I could smell his breath. He tried to crush me with his arms. White lights flickered and danced before my eyes. I was nearly out on my feet.

He screamed again. I butted with my head. It took him by surprise. His grip loosened, and I broke away for a second.

I threw the hardest punch of my life and heard the crunch of his jaw. Soneji didn't go down! What did it take to hurt him?

He came at me again, and I struck his left cheek. I felt bone crush

under my fist. He screamed, then moaned, but he didn't fall, didn't stop coming after me.

"You can't hurt me," he gasped, growled. "You're going to die. You can't stop it from happening. You can't stop this now."

Gary Soneji came at me again. I finally raised the Glock, got it out. *Hurt him, hurt him, kill him right now*.

I fired! And although it happened fast, it seemed like slow motion. I thought I could *feel* the gunshot travel through Soneji's body. The shot bulldozed through his lower jaw. It must have blown his tongue away, his teeth.

What remained of Soneji reached out to me, tried to hold on, to claw at my face and throat. I pushed him away. *Hurt him, hurt him, kill him*.

He staggered several steps down the darkened tunnel. I don't know where he got the strength. I was too tired to chase him, but I knew I didn't have to.

He fell toward the stone floor. He dropped like a deadweight. As he hit the ground, the bomb in his pocket ignited. Gary Soneji exploded in flames. The tunnel behind him was illuminated for at least a hundred feet.

Soneji screamed for a few seconds, then he burned in silence—a human torch in his cellar. He had gone straight to hell.

It was finally over.

CHAPTER 64

CHAPTER 65

bowlful.

Sampson grabbed my arm tight, and hollered so I could hear him over the noise of joyful voices and also Toni Braxton wailing her heart out on the CD player. “You party on, Sugar. Say hello to all your other guests, all your peeps. I plan to be here until closing time.”

“I’ll catch you later,” I told him. “Nice boots, nice shorts, nice legs.”

“Thank you, thank you, thank you. You got that son of a bitch, Alex! You did the right thing. May his evil, hair-bag ass burn and rot in hell. I’m just sorry I wasn’t there with you.”

Christine had taken a quiet spot in the corner of the yard under our shade tree. She was talking with my favorite aunt, Tia, and my sister-in-law, Cilla. It was like her to put herself last on the greeting line.

I kissed Tia and Cilla, and then reached out and gave Christine a hug. I held her and didn’t want to let go. “Thank you for coming here for all this madness,” I said. “You’re the best surprise of all.”

She kissed me, and then we pulled apart. I think we were overly conscious that Damon and Jannie had never seen us together. Not like this anyway.

“Oh shit,” I muttered. “Look there.”

The two little devil-demons *were* watching us. Damon winked outrageously, and Jannie made an okay sign with her busy and quick little fingers.

“They’re way, way ahead of us,” Christine said and laughed. “Figures, Alex. We should have known.”

“Why don’t you two head on up to bed?” I kidded the kids.

“It’s only six o’clock, Daddy!” Jannie yelped, but she was grinning and laughing and so was everybody else.

It was a wild, let-loose party and everybody quickly got into the spirit. The monkey of Gary Soneji was finally off my back. I spotted Nana talking to some of my police friends.

I heard what she was saying as I passed. It was pure Nana Mama. “There is no history that I know of that has led from slavery to freedom, but there is sure a history from the slingshot to the Uzi,” she said to her audience of homicide detectives. My friends were grinning and nodding their heads as if they understood what she was saying, where she was coming from. I did. For better or for worse, Nana Mama had taught me how to think.

On the lighter side there was dancing to everything, from Marsalis to hip-hop. Nana even danced some. Sampson ran the barbecue in the backyard, featuring hot-and-spicy sausages, barbecued chicken, and more ribs than you would need for a Redskins tailgate party.

I was called upon to play a few tunes, so I banged out “’S

Wonderful," and then a jazzy version of "Ja Da"—"Ja da, Ja da, Ja da, jing, jing, jing!"

"Here's a stupid little melody," Jannie hammed it up at my side, "but it's so *soo-thing* and *appealing* to me."

I grabbed some slow dances with Christine as the sun set and the night progressed. The fit of our bodies was still magical and right. Just as I remembered it from the Rainbow Room. She seemed amazingly comfortable with my family and friends. I could tell that they *approved* of her big time.

I sang along with a Seal tune as we danced in the moonlight. "No, we're never going to survive—Unless—We get a little cra-azy."

"Seal would be sooo proud," she whispered in my ear.

"Mmm. Sure he would."

"You are such a good, smooth dancer," she said against my cheek.

"For a gumshoe and a flatfoot," I said. "I only dance with you, though."

She laughed, and then punched my side. "Don't you lie! I *saw* you dancing with John Sampson."

"Yes, but it didn't mean anything. It was only for the cheap sex."

Christine laughed and I could feel a small quiver in her stomach. It reminded me of how much life she had in her. It reminded me that she wanted kids, and that she ought to have them. I remembered everything about our night at the Rainbow Room, and afterward at the Astor. I felt as if I had known her forever. *She's the one, Alex.*

"I have summer school in the morning," Christine finally told me. It was already past midnight. "I brought my car. I'm okay. I've been drinking kiddie cocktails mostly. You enjoy your party. Alex."

"You sure?"

Her voice was firm. "Absolutely. I'm fine. I'm cool. And I'm outta here."

We kissed for a long time, and when we had to come up for air, we both laughed. I walked her out to her car. "Let me drive you home at least," I protested as I stood with my arms around her. "I want to. I insist."

"No, then my car would still be here. *Please* enjoy your party. Be with your friends. You can see me tomorrow, if you like. I'd like that. I won't take no for an answer."

We kissed again, and then Christine got in her car and drove away to Mitchellville.

I missed her already.

CHAPTER 66

limitations."

I smiled at Sampson. He finally had taken off his shades. It always surprises me how sensitive and warm his eyes are. "You call me watermelon-ass, we'll tangle again."

Sampson continued to nod and grin. Come to think of it, I hadn't seen him smiling so much in a long while. Life was good tonight. The best it had been in a while.

"You really like Ms. Christine. I think you've found yourself another special person. I'm sure of it. You're down for the count, champ."

"You jealous?" I asked him.

"Yeah, of course I am. Damn straight. Christine is all that and a bag of chips. But I would just fuck it up if I ever found somebody sweet and nice like that. You're easy to be with, Sugar. Always have been, even when you had your little watermelon-ass. Tough when you have to be, but you can show your feelings, too. Whatever it is, Christine likes you a lot. Almost as much as you like her."

Sampson pushed himself up off the sagging back porch step, which I needed to replace soon.

"God willing, I'm going to walk on home. Actually, I'm going to Cee Walker's house. The beautiful diva left the party a little early, but she was kind enough to give me a key. I'll be back, pick up my car in the morning. Best not to drive when you can hardly walk."

"Best not to," I agreed. "Thanks for the party."

Sampson waved good-bye, saluted, and then he went around the corner of the house, which he bumped on the way out.

I was alone on the back porch steps, staring out over Nana's moonlit garden, smiling like the fool I can be sometimes, but maybe not often enough.

I heard Sampson call out. Then his deep laugh came from the front of the house.

"Good night, watermelon-ass."

CHAPTER 67

loud pounding sounds. *Had he gone to Nana's room first? Damon and Jannie's? What was happening in our house?*

I reached for him and managed to grab his arm. I yanked hard and he shrieked again, a high-pitched sound, but definitely a man's voice.

Soneji? How could it be? I'd seen him die in the tunnels of Grand Central Station.

What was happening to me? Who was in my bedroom? Who was upstairs in our house?

"Jannie? Damon?—" I finally mumbled, tried to call to them. "*Nana? Nana?*"

I began scratching at his chest, his arms, felt something sticky, probably drawing blood. I was fighting with only one arm, and barely able to do that.

"Who are you? What are you doing? *Damon! Damon!*" I called out again. Much louder this time.

He broke loose and I fell out of the bed, face first. The floor came at me hard, *struck*, and my face went numb.

My whole body was on fire. I began to throw up on the carpet.

The bat, the sledgehammer, the crowbar, whatever in hell it was —came down again and seemed to split me in two. I was burning up with pain. *Ax! Has to be ax!*

I could feel and smell blood everywhere around me on the floor. My blood?

"I told you there was no way to stop me!" he screamed. "I told you."

I looked up and thought I recognized the face looming above me. *Gary Soneji? Could it possibly be Soneji? How could that possibly be? It couldn't!*

I understood that I was dying, and I didn't want to die. I wanted to run, to see my kids one more time. Just one more look at them.

I knew I couldn't stop the attack. Knew there was nothing I could do to stop this horror from happening.

I thought of Nana and Jannie, Damon, Christine. My heart ached for them.

Then I let God do His will.

Part Four

CHAPTER 68

bright red blood, all over her. The sight was gruesome and awful. It wasn't the worst thing he'd encountered in his years on the night route, but it was right up there.

The woman's eyes were open and she was still conscious. She reached out a frail, thin arm toward him. *Must be domestic violence*, he thought. *Or maybe a robbery at her home*.

"Please help us," Nana Mama whispered. "Please help us."

CHAPTER 69

shook beneath his weight.

A low moan escaped his mouth. He was no longer strong, no longer brave. His heart was breaking and he choked back a sob.

When she saw him, Jannie started to cry. “Uncle John, Uncle John.” She said his name in the tiniest, saddest, hurt voice.

Jannie isn’t dead, Jannie is alive, Sampson thought, and the words almost tumbled out of his mouth. He wanted to shout the truth to the looky-loos. *Stop your damn rumors and lies!* He wanted to know everything, all at once, but that just wasn’t possible.

Sampson leaned in close to Jannie, his goddaughter, whom he loved as if she were his own child. Her nightgown was smeared with blood. The coppery smell of blood was strong and he was almost sick again.

More blood ribboned through Jannie’s tight, carefully braided hair. She was so proud of her braids, her beautiful hair. *Oh, dear God. How could this happen? How could it be?* He remembered her singing “Ja Da,” just the night before.

“You’re okay, baby,” Sampson whispered, the words catching like barbed wire in his throat. “I’m going to be back here with you in a minute. You’re okay, Jannie. I need to run upstairs. I’ll be right back, baby. Be right back, Promise you.”

“What about Damon? What about my daddy?” Jannie whimpered as she softly cried.

Her eyes were wide with fear, with a terror that made Sampson’s heart break all over again. She was just a little girl. How could anyone do this?

“Everybody’s okay, baby. They’re okay,” Sampson whispered again. His tongue was thick, his mouth as dry as sandpaper. He could barely get out the words. *Everybody’s okay, baby*. He prayed that was true.

The EMS medics did their best to wave Sampson away, and they carried Jannie down to a waiting ambulance. More ambulances were still arriving in front, and more police cruisers as well.

He pushed his way into the house, which was crowded with police —both street officers and detectives. When the first alarm came, half of the precinct must have rushed over to the Cross house. He had never seen so many cops in one place.

He was late as usual—the *late* John Sampson, Alex liked to call him. He’d slept at a woman’s house, Cee Walker’s and couldn’t be reached right away. His beeper was off, taking a night off after Alex’s party—after the big celebration.

Someone knew Alex would have his guard down, Sampson thought, being a homicide detective already. *Who knew? Who did this terrible thing?*

What in the name of God happened here?

CHAPTER 70

FBI. Kyle Craig is here."

Sampson broke away from Rakeem Powell and lunged toward the bedroom. *Everybody wasn't dead inside the house—but Alex had been shot. Somebody came here to get him! Who could it have been?*

Sampson tried to go into Alex's bedroom, but he was held back by men he didn't know—probably FBI from the look of them.

Kyle Craig was in the room. He knew that much. The FBI was here already. "Tell Kyle I'm here," he told the men at the door. "Tell Kyle Craig it's Sampson."

One of the FBI agents ducked inside. Kyle came out immediately, pushed his way into the hall to Sampson.

"Kyle, what the hell?" Sampson tried to talk. "*Kyle*, what happened?"

"He's been shot twice. Shot and beaten," Kyle said. "I need to talk to you, John. Listen to me, just *listen* to me, will you."

CHAPTER 71

Now… what was this? Sampson thought. *What's going on here?*

"Who the hell is that?" he asked Kyle Craig. "Who is that, Kyle? Who is that goddamn ponytailed asshole?"

CHAPTER 72

put intense pressure on both the Washington police and the Bureau. I was there on Fifth Street for the simplest of reasons—to relieve the pressure.

I felt an unpleasant aura, residue from the recent violence, as I approached the tidy, white-shingled Cross house. Some policemen I passed were red-eyed and a few seemed almost to be in shock. It was all very strange and disquieting.

I wondered if Alex Cross had died since I had left Quantico. I already had a sixth sense for the terrible and unexpected violence that had taken place inside the modest, peaceful-looking house. I wished that none of the others were at the crime scene, so I could absorb everything without all these distractions.

That was what I had been brought here to do. Observe the scene of unbelievable mayhem. Get a gut feeling for what might have happened in the early hours of the morning. Figure everything out quickly and efficiently.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Kyle Craig coming out of the house. He was in a hurry, as he always is. I sighed. *Now it begins, now it begins*.

Kyle crossed Fifth Street in a quick jog. He came up to me and we shook hands. I was glad to see him. Kyle is smart and very organized, and also supportive of those he works with. He's famous for getting things done.

"They just moved Alex," he said. "He's hanging on."

"What's the prognosis? Tell me, Kyle." I needed to know everything. I was there to collect facts. This was the start of it.

Kyle averted his eyes. "Not good. They say he won't live. They're sure he won't live."

CHAPTER 73

"Dr. Cross is alive. As you can see, I just got here, so I don't know much. So far, we have no suspects, no theories, no leads, nothing particularly interesting to talk about," I said.

"What about the Mr. Smith case," a woman reporter shouted at me. She was a dark-haired anchorperson type, perky as a chipmunk. "Are you putting Mr. Smith on hold now? How can you work two big cases? What's up, Doc?" the reporter said and smiled. She was obviously smarter and wittier than she looked.

I winced, rolled my eyes, and smiled back at her. "No suspects, no theories, no leads, nothing interesting to talk about," I repeated. "I have to go inside. The interview's over. Thanks for your concern. I know it's genuine in this god-awful case. I admire Alex Cross, too."

"Did you say admire or admired?" another reporter shouted at me from the back

"Why did they bring you in on this, Mr. Pierce? Is Mr. Smith involved?"

I couldn't help arching my eyebrows at the question. I felt an unpleasant itch in my brain. "I'm here because I get lucky sometimes, all right? Maybe I'll get lucky again. I have to go into the trenches now. I promise that I'll tell you if and when we have anything. I sincerely doubt that Mr. Smith attacked Alex Cross last night. And I said *admire*, present tense."

I pulled Kyle Craig out of there with me, holding on to his arm for support as much as anything. He grinned as soon as we had our backs to the horde.

"That was pretty goddamn good," he said. "I think you managed to confuse the hell out of them, even beyond the usual blank stares."

"Mad dogs of the Fourth Estate," I shrugged. "Smears of blood on their lips and cheeks. They couldn't care less about Cross or his family. Not one question about the kids. Edison said, 'We don't know a millionth of one per cent about *anything!*' The press doesn't get that. They want everything in black-and-white. They mistake simplicity, and simplemindedness, for the truth."

"Make nice with the D.C. police," Kyle cajoled, or maybe he was giving me a friendly warning. "This is an emotional time for them. That's Detective John Sampson on the porch. He's a friend of Alex. Alex's closest friend, in fact."

"Great," I muttered, "Just who I don't want to see right now."

I glanced at Detective Sampson. He looked like a bad storm about to happen. *I didn't want to be here. Didn't want or need any of this*.

Kyle patted my shoulder. "We need you on this one. Soneji promised this would happen," he suddenly told me. "He *predicted* it."

I stared at Kyle Craig. He'd delivered his stunning thunderbolt of news in his usual deadpan, understated way, sort of like Sam

Sheppard on Quaalude.

"Say again? What was that last bit?"

"Gary Soneji warned Alex that he'd get him, even if he died. Soneji said he couldn't be stopped. It looks like he made good on his promise. I want you to tell me how. Tell me how Soneji did it. *That's* why you're here, Thomas."

CHAPTER 74

was yet.

I stopped beside a battered and rusting EMS truck. The roof lights were flashing, the rear doors thrown open. I looked inside and saw a boy—it had to be Damon Cross.

The boy had been badly beaten. His face and arms were bloody, but he was alert and talking in a soft voice to the medics, who tried to be gentle and comforting.

"Why wouldn't he have killed the children? Why just thrash out at them?" Kyle said. We had the same mind-set on that question.

"His heart wasn't in it." I said the first thing that came into my head, the first *feeling* I had. "He was compelled to make a symbolic gesture toward the Cross children, but no more than that."

I turned to look at Kyle. "I don't know, Kyle. Maybe he was frightened. Or in a hurry. Maybe he was afraid of waking Cross." All of those thoughts invaded my mind, almost in an instant. *I felt as if I had briefly met the attacker*.

I looked up at the old house, the Cross house. "Okay, let's go to the bedroom, if you don't mind. I want to see it before the techies do their number in there. I need to see Alex Cross's room. I don't know, but I think something is seriously fucked up here. This certainly wasn't done by Gary Soneji or his ghost."

"How do you know that?" Kyle grabbed his arm and made eye contact. "How can you know for sure?"

"Soneji would have killed the two kids and the grandmother."

CHAPTER 75

nasty and disturbing puzzle, but a very intriguing one. Everything about the case was intense, and highly unusual.

I heard footsteps thumping outside in the hallway and looked up, my concentration interrupted. The bedroom door suddenly swung open and thudded against the wall.

Kyle Craig popped his head inside. He looked concerned. His face was white as chalk. Something had happened. “I have to go right now. Alex has gone into cardiac arrest!”

CHAPTER 76

in the BSU, I asked to be put on the Mr. Smith case. My superiors fought the move at first, but finally they gave in.

"Maybe you'll change your mind one day," Kyle said. I had a feeling that he personally believed I would. Kyle likes to believe that everyone thinks as he does: with perfectly clear logic and a minimum of emotional baggage.

"I don't think so," I told him, without sounding argumentative, or even too firm on the point. "Who knows, though?"

"Maybe after you finally catch Smith," he persisted with his point.

"Yes, maybe then," I said.

"You don't think Smith—" he started to say, but then backed off from the absurd notion that Mr. Smith could be involved with the attack here in Washington.

"No," I said, "I do not. Smith couldn't have made this attack. They would all be dead and mutilated if he had."

CHAPTER 77

the bad news. Unsentimentally, the way I knew he wanted it. “That’s what the doctors believe. But what the hell do doctors know?” I added.

“Is that what you think?” Kyle asked.

The pupils of his eyes were the tiniest, darkest points. He was taking this as badly as I’d seen him react to anything since I’d known him. He was being very emotional for Kyle. I understood how close he and Cross had been.

I sighed and shut my eyes. I wondered if I should tell him what I really thought. Finally, I opened them. I said, “It might be better if he doesn’t make it, Kyle.”

CHAPTER 78

She winced, but she was listening intently, waiting for me to finish. I was thinking that if Alex Cross was anything near as strong as this woman, as willful, then he must be something special as a detective.

I went on.

"Because of the nick to the artery there was considerable blood loss. The contents of the stomach itself and the small bowel can be sources of *E. coli* infection. There's a danger of inflammation of the abdominal cavity—peritonitis, and possibly pancreatitis, all of which can be fatal. The gunshot wound is the *injury*, the infection is the *complication*. The second shot went through his left wrist, without shattering bone, but missed the radial artery. That's what we know so far. That's the truth."

I stopped at that point. My eyes never left those of the elderly woman, and hers never left mine.

"Thank you," she said in a resigned whisper. "I appreciate that you didn't condescend to me. Are you a doctor here at the hospital? You speak as if you were."

I shook my head. "No, I'm not. I'm with the FBI. I studied to be a doctor."

Her eyes widened and seemed even more alert than when we had come in. I sensed that she had tremendous reserves of strength. "Alex is a doctor *and* a detective."

"I'm a detective, too," I said.

"I'm Nana Mama. I'm Alex's grandmother. What's your name?"

"Thomas," I told her. "My name is Thomas Pierce."

"Well, thank you for speaking the truth."

CHAPTER 79

He actually did seem to be an "alien." Few people could conceive of another human acting as Smith routinely did.

The inspector let his eyes wander. He took in the electronic sign hanging at the Lycée St Louis corner. Today it advertised "Tour de France Femina" and also something called "Formation d'artistes." More madness, he thought. He coughed out a cynical laugh.

He noticed a sidewalk artist contemplating his sidewalk chalk masterpiece. The man was oblivious to the police emergency. The same could be said of a homeless woman blithely washing her breakfast dishes in the public fountain.

Good for both of them. They passed Faulks's test for sanity in the modern age.

As he climbed the gray stone stairway leading to a blue painted door, he was tempted to turn toward the crowd of onlookers massed on rue de Vaugirard, and to scream, "Go back to your little chores and your even smaller lives. Go see an art movie at Cinéma Champollion. This has nothing whatsoever to do with you. Smith takes only interesting and deserving specimens—so you people have absolutely nothing to worry about."

That morning, one of the finest young surgeons at L'Ecole Pratique de Médecine had been reported missing. If Mr. Smith's pattern held, within a couple of days, the surgeon would be found dead and mutilated. That was the way it had been with all the other victims. It was the only strand that represented anything like a repeating pattern. *Death by mutilation*.

Faulks nodded and said hello to two flics and another low-ranking inspector inside the surgeon's expensively furnished apartment. The place was magnificent, filled with antique furniture, expensive art, with a view of the Sorbonne.

Well, the golden boy of L'Ecole Pratique de Médecine had finally gotten a bad break. Yes, things had suddenly gotten very bleak for Dr. Abel Sante.

"Nothing, no sign of a struggle?" Faulks asked the closest flic as he entered the apartment.

"Not a trace, just like the others. The poor rich bastard is gone, though. He's disappeared, and Mr. Smith has him."

"He's probably in Smith's space capsule," another flic said, a youngish man with longish red hair and trendy sunglasses.

Faulks turned brusquely. "*You!* Get the hell out of here! Go out on the street with the rest of the madmen and the goddamned pigeons! I would hope Mr. Smith might take *you* for his *space capsule* but, unfortunately, I suspect his standards are too high."

Having said his piece and banished the offending police officer, the inspector went to examine the handiwork of Mr. Smith. He had a

procès-verbal to write up. He had to make some sense out of the madness somehow. All of France, all of Europe, waited to hear the latest news.

CHAPTER 80

Alex Cross was conscious, and I stared into his brown eyes for a long time. What secrets were hidden there? What did he know? Had he actually seen the face of his assailant? *Who did this to you? Not Soneji. Who dared to go into your bedroom?*

He couldn't talk and I could see nothing in his eyes. No awareness that I was there with Detective Sampson. He didn't seem to recognize Sampson either. Sad.

Dr. Cross was getting excellent care at St. Anthony's. The hospital bed had a Stryker frame attached to it. The injured wrist was encased in an elastoplast cast and the arm was anchored to a trapeze bar. He was receiving oxygen through a clear tube that ran into an outlet in the wall. A fancy monitor called a Slave scope was providing pulse, temp, blood pressure, and EKG readings.

"Why don't you leave him alone?" Sampson finally spoke after a few minutes. "Why don't you leave both of us. You can't help here. Please, go."

I nodded, but continued to look into the eyes of Alex Cross for a few more seconds. Unfortunately, he had nothing to tell me.

I finally left Cross and Sampson alone. I wondered if I would ever see Alex Cross again. I doubted that I would. I didn't believe in miracles anymore.

Chapter 81

maddening way.

I typed: *Could Gary Soneji possibly still be alive? Don't rule anything out yet, not even the most absurd possibility.*

Exhume Soneji's body if necessary.

Read Cross's book—Along Came a Spider.

Visit Lorton Prison, where Soneji was held.

I pushed aside my computer after an hour's work. It was nearly two in the morning. My head felt stuffed, as if I had a terrible, nagging cold. I still couldn't sleep. I was thirty-three years old; I was already beginning to feel like an old man.

I kept seeing the bloody bedroom at the Cross house. No one can imagine what it's like to live with such imagery day and night. I saw Alex Cross—the way he looked at St. Anthony's Hospital. Then I was remembering victims of Mr. Smith, his "studies," as he called them.

The terrifying scenes play on and on and on in my head. Always leading to the same place, the same conclusion.

I can see another bedroom. It is the apartment Isabella and I shared in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

With total clarity, I remembered running down the narrow hallway that terrible night. I remember my heart pushing into my throat, its feeling larger than a clenched fist. I remember every pounding step that I took, everything I saw along the way.

I finally saw Isabella, and I thought it must be a dream, a terrible nightmare.

Isabella was in our bed, and I knew that she was dead. No one could have survived the butchery I witnessed there. No one did survive—neither of us.

Isabella had been savagely murdered at twenty-three, in the prime of her life, before she could be a mother, a wife, the anthropologist she'd dreamed of becoming. I couldn't help myself, couldn't stop. I bent and held what was left of Isabella, *what was left.*

How can I ever forget any of it? How can I turn that sight off in my mind?

The simple answer is, I cannot.

CHAPTER 82

Cross house.

The attacker had definitely hidden in the cellar. That couldn't be a coincidence.

Had he known about Gary Soneji's explicit warning to Cross? That possibility was disturbing as hell. I didn't want to settle on any theories or premature conclusions yet. I just needed to collect as much raw data and information as I could. Possibly because I'd been to medical school, I approached cases as a clinical scientist would.

Collected all the data first. Always the data.

It was quiet in the cellar, and I could focus and concentrate all my attention on my surroundings. I tried to imagine the attacker lurking here during the party, and then afterward, as the house grew quiet, until Alex Cross finally went to bed.

The attacker was a coward.

He wasn't in a rage state. He was methodical.

It was not a crime of passion.

The intruder had struck out at each of the children first, but not fatally. He had beaten Alex Cross's grandmother, but had spared her. *Why?* Only Alex Cross was meant to die, and so far even that hadn't happened.

Had the attacker failed? Where was the intruder now?

Was he still in Washington? Checking out the Cross house right now? Or at St. Anthony's Hospital, where the Metro police were guarding Alex Cross.

As I passed an ancient coal stove, I noticed the metal door was slightly ajar. I poked it open with my handkerchief and peered inside. I couldn't see very well and took out a penlight. There were inches of ash that were light gray in color. Someone had burned a flammable substance recently, possibly newspapers or magazines.

Why start a fire in the middle of summer? I wondered

A small hand shovel was on a worktable near the stove. I used the shovel to sift through the ashes.

I carefully scraped along the stove's bottom.

I heard a *clink*. A metal-against-metal noise.

I scooped out a shovelful of ash. Something came with the ash. It was hard, heavier. My expectations weren't high. I was still just collecting data, anything and everything, even the contents of an old stove. I emptied the ashes onto the worktable in a pile, then smoothed it out.

I saw what the small shovel had struck. I flipped over the new evidence with the tip of the shovel. *Yes*, I said to myself. I finally had something, the first bit of evidence.

It was Alex Cross's detective shield, and it was burned and charred.

Someone wanted us to find the shield.
The intruder wants to play! I thought. This is cat and mouse.

CHAPTER 83

Dr. Sante could easily imagine the furor and outrage, the panic continuing in Paris and throughout France. NOTED PHYSICIAN AND TEACHER ABDUCTED! The headline in *Le Monde* would read something like that. Or, NEW MR. SMITH HORROR IN PARIS.

He was the horror! He was certain that tens of thousands of police, as well as the army, were searching for him now. Of course, every hour he was missing, his chances for survival grew dimmer. He knew that from reading past articles about Mr. Smith's unearthly abductions, and what happened to the victims.

Why me? God Almighty, he couldn't stand this infernal monologue anymore.

He couldn't stand this nearly upside-down position, this terribly cramped space, for one more second.

He just couldn't bear it. Not one more second!

Not one more second!

Not one more second!

He couldn't breathe!

He was going to die in here.

Right here, in a goddamn dumbwaiter. Stuck between floors, in a godforsaken house in Ile-de-France somewhere on the outskirts of Paris.

Mr. Smith had put him in the dumbwaiter, stuffed him inside like a bundle of dirty laundry, and then left him there—for God only knew how long. It seemed like hours, at least several hours, but Abel Sante really wasn't sure anymore.

The excruciating pain came and went, but mostly it rushed through his body in powerful waves. His neck, his shoulders, and his chest ached so badly, beyond belief, beyond his tolerance for pain. The feeling was as if he'd been slowly crushed into a squarish heap. If he hadn't been claustrophobic before, he was now.

But that wasn't the worst part of this. No, it wasn't the worst. The most terrifying thing was that he knew what all of France wanted to know, what the whole world wanted to know.

He knew certain things about Mr. Smith's identity. He knew precisely how he talked. He believed that Mr. Smith might be a philosopher, perhaps a university professor or student.

He had even *seen* Mr. Smith.

He had looked out from the dumbwaiter—upside down, no less—and stared into Smith's hard, cold eyes, seen his nose, his lips.

Mr. Smith saw that.

Now there was no hope for him.

"Damn you, Smith. Damn you to hell. I know your shitty secret. I know everything now. You *are* a fucking alien! *You aren't human."*

CHAPTER 84

Smith might be an alien. Even newspapers like the *New York Times* and the *Times* of London had run stories stating that police authorities believed Smith might be an extraterrestrial being who had come here to study humans. To *grok*, as it were.

"Smith has become the evil E.T. Something for *X-Files* fans to contemplate between TV episodes. Who knows, perhaps Mr. Smith *is* a visitor from outer space, at least from some other parallel world. He doesn't have anything in common with human beings, I can vouch for that. I've visited the murder scenes."

Sampson nodded. "Gary Soneji didn't have much in common with the human race," he said in his deep, strangely quiet voice. "Soneji was from another planet, too. He's an ALF, alien life-form."

"I'm not sure he fits the same psychological profile as Smith."

"Why is that?" he asked. His eyes narrowed. "You think your mass killer is smarter than our mass killer?"

"I'm not saying that. Gary Soneji was very bright, but he made mistakes. So far, Mr. Smith hasn't made any."

"And that's why you're going to solve this hinky mystery? Because Gary Soneji makes mistakes?"

"I'm not making predictions," I told Sampson. "I know better than that. So do you."

"Did Gary Soneji make a mistake at Alex's house?" he suddenly asked, his dark eyes penetrating.

I sighed out loud. "I think someone did."

The helicopter was settling down to land outside Princeton. A thin line of cars silently streamed past the airfield on a state highway. People watched us from the cars. It could safely be assumed that everything had started here. The house where Gary Soneji had been raised was less than six miles away. This was the monster's original lair.

"You're sure Soneji's not still alive?" John Sampson asked one more time. "Are you absolutely sure about that?"

"No," I finally said. "I'm not sure of anything yet."

CHAPTER 85

capable of murder. Not at any time. Not a clue.

"Some days I think I've gotten used to what's happened, but then suddenly it's fresh and incomprehensible to me all over again," he told us as the midday breeze ruffled his longish white hair.

"Did you stay close to Gary as he got older?" I asked cautiously. I was studying his build, which was large. His arms were thick and looked as if they could still do physical damage.

"I remember long talks with Gary from the time he was a boy right up until it was alleged he'd kidnapped those two children in Washington." *Alleged*.

"And you were taken by surprise?" I said. "You had no idea?"

Walter Murphy looked directly at me—for the first time. I knew that he resented my tone, the irony in it. How angry could I make him? How much of a temper did the old man have?

I leaned in and listened more closely. I watched every gesture, every tic. *Collected the data*.

"Gary always wanted to fit in, just like everybody else does," he said abruptly. "He trusted me because he knew I accepted him for what he was."

"What was it about Gary that needed to be accepted?"

The old man shifted his eyes to the peaceful-looking pine woods surrounding the farm. *I could feel Soneji in those woods. It was as if he were watching us.*

"He could be hostile at times, I'll admit. His tongue was sharp, double-barbed. Gary had an air of superiority that ruffled some tail feathers."

I kept at Walter Murphy, didn't give him space to breathe. "But not when he was around you?" I asked. "He didn't ruffle your feathers?"

The old man's clear blue eyes returned from their trip into the woods. "No, we were always close. I know we were, even if the expensive shrinks say it wasn't possible for Gary to feel love, to feel anything for anybody. I was never the target for any of his temper explosions."

That was a fascinating revelation, but I sensed it was a lie. I glanced at Sampson. He was looking at me in a new way.

"These explosions at other people, were they ever premeditated?" I asked.

"Well, you know damn well he burned down his father and stepmother's house. They were in it. So were his stepbrother and stepsister. He was supposed to be away at school. He was an honor student at the Peddie School in Hightstown. He was making friends there."

"Did you ever meet any of the friends from Peddie?" The

quickening tempo of my questions made Walter Murphy uneasy. Did he have his grandson's temper?

A spark flared in the old man's eyes. Unmistakable anger was there now. Maybe the real Walter Murphy was appearing.

"No, he never brought his friends from school around here. I suppose you're suggesting that he didn't have friends, that he just wanted to seem more normal than he was. Is that your two-bit analysis? Are you a forensic psychologist, by the way? Is that your game?"

"Trains?" I said.

I wanted to see where Walter Murphy would go with it. This was important, a test, a moment of truth and reckoning.

C'mon, old man. Trains?

He looked off into the woods again, still serene and beautiful. "Mmm. I'd forgotten, hadn't thought of the trains in a while. Fiona's son, her real son, had an expensive set of Lionel trains. Gary wasn't allowed to even be in the same room with them. When he was ten or eleven, the train set disappeared. The whole damn set, gone."

"What happened to the train set?"

Walter Murphy almost smiled. "They all knew Gary had taken it. Destroyed it, or maybe buried it somewhere. They spent an entire summer questioning him as to the train set's whereabouts, but he never told them squat. They grounded him for the summer and he still never told."

"It was his secret, his power over them," I said, offering a little more "two-bit analysis."

I was beginning to feel certain disturbing things about Gary and his grandfather. I was starting to know Soneji and, maybe in the process, getting closer to whoever had attacked the Cross house in Washington. Quantico was researching possible copycat theories. I liked the partner angle—except for the fact that Soneji had never had one before.

Who had crept into Cross's house? And how?

"I was reading some of Dr. Cross's detective logs on the way here," I told the grandfather. "Gary had a recurring nightmare. It took place here on your farm. Are you aware of it? Gary's nightmare at your farm?"

Walter Murphy shook his head. He was blinking his eyes, twitching. He knew something.

"I'd like your permission to do something here," I finally said. "I'll need two shovels. Picks, if you have them."

"And if I say no?" he raised his voice suddenly. It was the first time he'd been openly uncooperative.

And then it struck me. The old man is acting, too. That's why he

understood so much about Gary. He looks off into the trees to set his mind and gain control for the next few lines he has to deliver. *The grandfather is an actor! Just not as good as Gary*.

"Then we'll get a search warrant," I told him. "Make no mistake. We will do the search anyway."

CHAPTER 86

earliest nightmare."

"Maybe I don't want to enter Gary Soneji's earliest nightmare," Sampson said laughing again. The tension between us was definitely breaking some. This was better.

I lifted the pickax high and swung down with great force. I repeated the action again and again, until I found a smooth, comfortable, working rhythm.

Sampson looked surprised as he watched me handle the pick. "You've done this kind of fieldwork before, boy," he said, and began to dig at my side.

"Yes, I lived on a farm in El Toro, California. My father, his father, and my grandfather's father were all small-town doctors. But they continued to live on our family horse farm. I was supposed to go back there to set up practice, but then I never finished my medical training."

The two of us were hard at work now. Good, honest work: looking for old bodies, searching for ghosts from Gary Soneji's past. Trying to goad Grandfather Murphy.

We took off our shirts, and soon both of us were covered with sweat and dust.

"This was like a *gentleman's* farm? Back in California? The one you lived on as a boy?"

I snorted out a laugh as I pictured the gentleman's farm. "It was a very small farm. We had to struggle to keep it going. My family didn't believe a doctor should get rich taking care of other people. 'You shouldn't take a profit from other people's misery,' my father said. He still believes that."

"Huh. So your whole family's weird?"

"That's reasonably accurate portrait."

CHAPTER 87

labored. We had been digging in the summer heat for nearly an hour. It was in the nineties, sticky-hot, and claustrophobic. We were in a hole up to our waists.

"Shit! Here we go again. You recognize this from any of your med-school anatomy classes?" Sampson asked.

We were looking down at fragments from a human skeleton. "It's the scapula and mandible. It could be a young boy or girl," I told him.

"So this is the handiwork of young Gary? This Gary's first kill? Another kid?"

"I don't know for sure. Let's not forget about Grandpa Walter. Let's keep looking. If it is Gary, maybe he left a sign. These would be his earliest souvenirs. They would have been precious to him."

We kept on digging and, minutes later, we found another cache. Only the sound of our labored breathing broke the silence.

There were more bones, possibly from a large animal, possibly a deer, but probably human.

And there was something else, a definite sign from young Gary. It had been wrapped in tinfoil, which I now carefully removed.

It was a Lionel locomotive, undoubtedly the one he had stolen from his stepbrother.

The toy train that launched a hundred deaths.

CHAPTER 88

beautiful. Always." And then they took him away from her.

The image from that morning and his final words made her shiver to remember. The Chinese had a saying that had been in her mind for a while, troubling her: *Society prepares the crime; the criminal only commits it.*

"Are you all right?" Laura Dixon was at her side, had seen Christine falter at the door.

"Excuse us, ladies and gentlemen," she said to her class. "Ms. Johnson and I have to chat for a minute right outside the door. You may chat as well. Quietly. Like the ladies and gentlemen that you are, I trust."

Then Laura took Christine's arm and walked her out into the deserted hallway.

"Do I look *that* bad?" Christine asked. "Does it show all over my face, Laura?"

Laura hugged her tightly and the heat from her friend's ample body felt good. Laura *was* good.

"Don't you try to be so *goddamn* strong, don't try to be so brave," Laura said. "Have you heard anything more, sweetheart? Tell Laura. Talk to me."

Christine mumbled into Laura's hair. It felt so good to hold her, to hold on to someone. "Still listed as critical. Still no visitors. Unless you happen to be high up in the Metro police or the FBI."

"Christine, Christine," Laura whispered softly. "What am I going to do with you?"

"What, Laura? I'm okay now. I really am."

"You are so strong, girl. You are about the best person I have ever met. I love you dearly. That's all I'll say for right now."

"That's enough. Thank you," Christine said. She felt a little better, not quite so hollowed out and empty, but the feeling didn't last very long.

She started to walk back to her office.

As she turned down the east corridor, she spotted the FBI's Kyle Craig waiting for her near her office. She hurried down the hallway toward him. *This is not good*, she told herself. *Oh dear God, no. Why is Kyle here? What does he have to tell me?*

"Kyle, what is it?" Her voice trembled and nearly went out of control.

"I have to talk to you," he said, taking her hand. "Please, just listen. Come inside your office, Christine."

CHAPTER 89

Always,
Mr. Smith

CHAPTER 90

Smith never takes long. He knows it's too dangerous. I need time to think about this case anyway."

Sampson frowned and he continued to shake his head. "You said it was important to visit Lorton Prison. You said Lorton is the one place where Soneji could have gotten somebody to do his dirty work. His partner probably came from Lorton."

"I still plan to visit Lorton Prison. Right now, I have to try and prevent a murder. Smith abducted a doctor in Paris. He's dedicating the kill to me."

John Sampson wasn't impressed with anything I'd said.

I didn't get a chance to tell him the other thing, the part that bothered me the most. I hadn't told Kyle Craig either.

Isabella had come from Paris. Paris was her home. I hadn't been there since her murder.

Mr. Smith knew that.

CHAPTER 91

Smith let his gaze wander around the country kitchen. One entire wall was a stone fireplace. Another wall was white tile, with antique shelves that held copper pots, white café au lait bowls, antique jam jars, or *confitures fines*, as they were called here. He knew that, knew just about everything about everything. There was an antique black cast-iron stove with brass knobs. And a large white porcelain sink. Adjacent to the sink, just above a butcher-block worktable, hung an impressive array of kitchen knives. The knives were beautiful, absolutely perfect in every way.

He was avoiding looking at the victim, wasn't he?

He knew that he was. He always did.

Finally, he lowered his eyes and looked into the victim's. So this was Abel Sante.

This was lucky number nineteen.

CHAPTER 92

Absolutely inhuman, he thought to himself.

Abel Sante—he was the key to everything, and none of the police masterminds could figure it out. None of them were worth shit as detectives, as investigators, as anything. It was so simple, if only they would use their minds.

Abel Sante.

Abel Sante.

Abel Sante.

The autopsy finished, Mr. Smith lay down on the kitchen floor with what was left of poor Dr. Sante. He did this with every victim. Mr. Smith hugged the bleeding corpse against his own body. He whispered and sighed, whispered and sighed. It was always like this.

And then, Smith sobbed loudly. “I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. Please forgive me. Somebody forgive me,” he moaned in the deserted farmhouse.

Abel Sante.

Abel Sante.

Abel Sante.

Didn’t anyone get it?

CHAPTER 93

pain. They like to tell lies, simply for the purpose of inflicting pain. They are obsessed with involving violence, torture, and especially the death of others.

As I said, all of this ran through my mind as I sat in my airplane seat high over the Atlantic. What interested me mostly, though, was the conclusion I'd reached about Mr. Smith, and which I had recently shared with Kyle Craig at Quantico.

At different times during the long and complex investigation, Mr. Smith *had fit all four of these classic murderer types.* He would seem to fit one personality disorder type almost perfectly—then change into another—back and forth at whim. He might even be a fifth type of psychopathic killer, a whole new breed of disorder type.

Perhaps the tabloids were right about Mr. Smith, and he *was* an alien. He wasn't like any other human. I knew that. *He had murdered Isabella.*

This was really why I couldn't sleep on the flight to Paris. It was why I could never sleep anymore.

CHAPTER 94

the hall lights. Isabella's Coach purse is on the floor. The contents are scattered about in a three-or four-foot radius. Very, very strange.

Loose change, her favorite Georg Jensen earrings, lipstick, assorted makeup containers, compact, cinnamon gum—all there on the floor.

Why didn't Isabella pick up her purse? Is she pissed at me for going out with my med-school chums?

That wouldn't be like Isabella. She is an open woman, liberal-minded to a fault.

I start back through the narrow, long apartment, looking for her everywhere. The apartment is laid out railroad-style, small rooms on a tight track leading to a single window that looks onto Inman Street.

Some of our secondhand scuba equipment is sitting in the hall. We had been planning a trip to California. Two air tanks, weight belts, wet suits, two sets of rubber fins clutter the hallway.

I grab a speargun—just in case. *In case of what?* I have no idea. How could I?

I become more and more frantic, and then afraid. "Isabella!" I call at the top of my voice. "Isabella? Where are you?"

Then I stop, everything in the world seems to stop. I let go of the speargun, let it fall, crash and clatter against the bare hardwood floor.

What I see in our bedroom will never leave me. I can still *see, smell*, even *taste*, every obscene detail. Maybe this is when my sixth sense is born, the strange feeling that is so much a part of my life now.

"Oh God! Oh Jesus, no!" I scream loud enough for the couple who live above us to hear. *This isn't Isabella,* I remember thinking. Those words of total disbelief. I may have actually spoken them aloud. *Not Isabella. It couldn't be Isabella. Not like this*.

And yet—I recognize the flowing auburn hair that I so love to stroke, to brush; the pouting lips that can make me smile, make me laugh out loud, or sometimes duck for cover; a fan-shaped, mother-of-pearl barrette Isabella wears when she wants to look particularly coquettish.

Everything in my life has changed in a heartbeat, or lack of one. I check for signs of breathing, a sign of life. I can feel no pulse in the femoral or carotid arteries. Not a beat. Nothing at all. *Not Isabella. This can't be happening.*

Cyanosis, a bluish coloration of the lips, nail beds, and skin is already taking place. Blood is pooled on the underside of her body. The bowels and bladder have relaxed, but these bodily secretions are nothing to me. They are nothing under the circumstances.

Isabella's beautiful skin looks waxy, almost translucent, as if it isn't her after all. Her pale green eyes have already lost their liquid and are flattening out. They can no longer see me, can they? I realize

they will never look at me again.

The Cambridge police arrive at the apartment somehow. They are everywhere all at once, looking as shocked as I know I look. My neighbors from the building are there, trying to comfort me, trying to calm me, trying not to be sick themselves.

Isabella is gone. We never even got to say good-bye. Isabella is dead, and I can't bring myself to believe it. An old James Taylor lyric, one of our favorites, weaves through my head. "But I always thought that I'd see you, one more time again." The song was "Fire and Rain." It was our song. It still is.

A terrible fiend was loose in Cambridge. He had struck less than a dozen blocks from Harvard University. He would soon receive a name: *Mr. Smith*, a literary allusion that could have happened only in a university town like Cambridge.

The worst thing, what I would never forget or forgive—the final thing—*Mr. Smith had cut out Isabella's heart*.

My reverie ended. My plane was landing at Charles de Gaulle Airport. I was in Paris.

So was Smith.

CHAPTER 95

policemen were looking at us as if we were both crazy. “I will *like hell* go home. Fine, though. *You* can tell the flics what we’d like them to do. And then they’ll do the exact opposite, I’m quite sure.”

“Of course they will. They’re French.”

Sondra was a tall brunette, willowy on top but with heavy legs, almost as if two body types had been fused. She was British, witty and bright, yet tolerant, even of Americans. She was devoutly Jewish and militantly gay. I enjoyed working with her, even at times like this.

I walked into the Parc de Montsouris with Sandy Greenberg, arm in arm. Once more into the fray.

“Why do you think he sends us *both* messages? Why does he want us both here?” she mused as we tramped across damp lawns that glistened under streetlights.

“We’re the stars in his weird galaxy. That’s my theory anyway. We’re also authority figures. Perhaps he likes to taunt authority. He might even have a modicum of respect for us.”

“I sincerely doubt that,” Sandy said.

“Then perhaps he likes showing us up, making himself feel superior. How about that theory?”

“I rather like it, actually. He could be watching us right now. I know he’s an egomaniac of the highest order. *Hello there, Mr. Smith from planet Mars. Are you watching? Enjoying the hell out of this?* God, I hate that creepy bastard!”

I peered around at the dark elm trees. There was plenty of cover here if someone wanted to observe us.

“Perhaps he’s here. He might be able to change shapes, you know. He could be that *balayeur des rues*, or that gendarme, or even that *fille de trottoir* in disguise,” I said.

We began the search at quarter past one. At two in the morning, we still hadn’t located the body of Dr. Abel Sante. It was strange and worrisome to everyone in the search party. It was obvious to me that Smith wanted to make it hard for us to locate the body. He had never done that before. He usually discarded bodies the way people throw away gum wrappers. *What was Smith up to?*

The Paris newspapers had evidently gotten a tip that we were searching the small park. They wanted a hearty serving of blood and guts for their breakfast editions. TV helicopters hovered like vultures overhead. Police barricades had been set up out on the street. We had everything except a victim.

The crowd of onlookers already numbered in the hundreds—and it was two o’clock in the morning. Sandy peered out at them. “Mr. Smith’s sodding fan club,” she sneered. “What a time! What a civilization! Cicero said that, you know.”

My beeper went off at half past two. The noise startled Sandy and

me. Then hers went off. *Dueling beepers. What a world, indeed*.

I was certain it was Smith. I looked at Sandy.

"What the hell is he pulling this time?" she said. She looked frightened. "Or maybe it's a *she*—what is *she* pulling?"

We removed our laptops from our shoulder bags. Sandy began to check her machine for messages. I got to mine first.

Pierce, the e-mail read,

> *welcome back to the real work, to the real chase. I lied to you. That was your punishment for unfaithfulness. I wanted to embarrass you, whatever that means. I wanted to remind you that you can't trust me, or anyone else—not even your friend, Ms. Greenberg. Besides, I really don't like the French. I've thoroughly enjoyed torturing them here tonight.*
>
> *Poor Dr. Abel Sante is at the Buttes-Chaumont Park. He's up near the temple. I swear it. I promise you.*
>
> *Trust me. Ha, ha! Isn't that the quaint sound you humans make when you laugh? I can't quite make the sound myself. You see, I've never actually laughed*.
>
> *Always,*
> *Mr. Smith*

Sandy Greenberg was shaking her head, muttering curses in the night air. She had gotten a message, too.

"Buttes-Chaumont Park," she repeated the location. Then she added, "He says that I shouldn't trust you. *Ha, ha!* Isn't that the quaint sound we humans make when we laugh?"

CHAPTER 96

park. Mr. Smith was finished playing with us. For now.

Sandy and I got out of the patrol car at the gardener's house near the temple, and we began to climb the steep stone steps. The flics and French soldiers around us weren't just tired and shell-shocked, they looked afraid. The body-recovery scene would stay with all of them for the rest of their lives. I had read John Webster's *The White Devil* while I was an undergrad at Harvard. Webster's weird seventeenth-century creation was filled with devils, demons, and werewolves—*all of them human.* I believed Mr. Smith was a human demon. The worst kind.

We pushed our way forward through thick bushes and brush. I could hear the low, pitiful whine of search dogs nearby. Then I saw four high-strung, shivering animals leading the way.

Predictably, the new crime scene was a unique one. It was quite beautiful, with an expansive view of Montmartre and Saint-Denis. During the day, people came here to stroll, climb, walk pets, live life as it should be lived. The park closed at 11:00 P.M. for safety reasons.

"Up ahead," Sandy whispered. "There's something."

I could see soldiers and police loitering in small groups. Mr. Smith had definitely been here. A dozen or more "packets," each wrapped in newspaper, were carefully laid out on a sloping patch of grass.

"Are we sure this is it?" one of the inspectors asked me in French. His name was Faulks. "What the hell is this? Is he making a joke?"

"It is not a joke, I can promise you that. Unwrap one of the bundles. Any one will do," I instructed the French policeman. He just looked at me as if I were mad.

"As they say in America," Faulks said in French, "this is your show."

"Do you speak English?" I spit out the words.

"Yes, I do," he answered brusquely.

"Good. Go fuck yourself," I said.

I walked over to the eerie pile of "packages," or perhaps "gifts" was the better word. There were a variety of shapes, each packet meticulously wrapped in newspaper. Mr. Smith the artiste. A large round packet looked as if it might be a head.

"French butcher shop. That's his motif for tonight. It's all just meat to him," I muttered to Sandy Greenberg. "He's mocking the French police."

I carefully unwrapped the newspaper with plastic gloves. "Christ Jesus, Sandy."

It wasn't quite a head—*only half a head.*

Dr. Abel Sante's head had been cleanly separated from the rest of the body, like an expensive cut of meat. It was sliced in half. The face was washed, the skin carefully pulled away. Only half of Sante's

mouth screamed at us—a single eye reflected a moment of ultimate terror.

"You're right. It *is* just meat to him," Sandy said. "How can you stand being right about him all the time?"

"I can't," whispered. "I can't stand it at all."

CHAPTER 97

children, but she absolutely loved it at the school. God, she loved kids, and she was good with them, too. She wanted children of her own so badly.

Her mind was all over the place tonight. Probably the late hour, and the second glass of merlot. The dark Ford sedan cruised along deserted streets at midnight. It was the usual route, almost always the same trail from Mitchellville to D.C. She wondered if that was wise, but figured they knew how to do their jobs.

Occasionally Christine glanced around, to see if they were being followed. She felt a little silly doing it. Couldn't help it, though.

She was part of a case that was important to the press now. And dangerous, too. They had absolutely no respect for her privacy or feelings. Reporters would show up at the school and try to question other teachers. They called her at home so frequently that she finally changed her number to an unlisted one.

She heard the *whoop* of nearby police or ambulance sirens and the unpleasant sound brought her out of her reverie. She sighed. She was almost there now.

She shut her eyes and took deep, slow breaths. She dropped her head down near her chest. She was tired and thought she needed a good cry.

"Are you all right, Ms. Johnson?" agent Dampier inquired. *He's got eyes in the back of his head. He's been watching me*, Christine thought. *He's watching everything that happens, but I guess that's good*.

"I'm fine." She opened her eyes and offered a smile. "Just a little tired is all. Too many early mornings and late nights."

Agent Dampier hesitated, then he said, "I'm sorry it has to be this way."

"Thank you," she whispered. "You make it a lot easier for me with your kindness. And *you're* a real good driver," she kidded agent Denjeau, who mostly kept quiet, but laughed now.

The FBI sedan hurtled down a steep concrete ramp and entered the building from the rear. This was a delivery entrance, she knew by now. She noticed that she was hugging herself again. Everything about the nightly trip seemed so unreal to her.

Both agents escorted her upstairs, right to the door, at which point they stepped back and she entered alone.

She gently closed the door and leaned against it. Her heart was pounding—it was always this way.

"Hello, Christine," Alex said, and she went and held him so tight, *so tight*, and everything was suddenly so much better. Everything made sense again.

CHAPTER 98

CHAPTER 99

the next hour and a half going over Cross's extensive notes and files on Gary Soneji. *I was looking for Soneji's partner*. The files dated back over four years. I was convinced that whoever attacked Alex Cross didn't do it randomly. There had to be a powerful connection with Soneji, *who claimed to always work alone*. It was a knotty problem and the profilers at Quantico weren't making headway with it either.

When I finally trudged back downstairs, Sampson and Nana were both in the kitchen. The uncluttered and practical-looking room was cozy and warm. It brought back memories of Isabella, who had loved to cook and was good at it, too, memories of our home and life together.

Nana looked up at me, her eyes as incisive as I remembered. "I remember you," she said. "You were the one who told me the truth. Are you close to anything yet? Will you solve this terrible thing?" she asked.

"No, I haven't solved it, Nana," I told her the truth again. "But I think Alex might have. Gary Soneji might have had a partner all along."

Chapter 100

bleached out by the sun.

"Princeton education sure worked out well for Conklin," Sampson said with sarcasm in his voice. "I'm really impressed."

For the past two years, Simon Conklin had managed an adult bookstore in the dilapidated strip mall. The store was located in a single-story, red-brick building. The front door was painted black and so were the padlocks. The sign read ADULT.

"What's your feeling about Simon Conklin? Do you remember much about him?" I asked as we walked toward the front door. I suspected there was a back way out, but I didn't think he would run on us.

"Oh, Simon Says is definitely a world-class freakazoid. He was high on my Unabomber list at one time. Has an alibi for the night Alex was attacked."

"He would," I muttered. "Of course he would. He's a clever boy. Don't ever forget that."

We walked inside the seedy, grungy store and flashed our badges. Conklin stepped out from behind a raised counter. He was tall and gangly and painfully thin. His milky brown eyes were distant, as if he were someplace else. He was instantly unlikable.

He had on faded black jeans and a studded black leather vest, no shirt under the vest. If I hadn't known a few Harvard flameouts myself, I wouldn't have imagined he had graduated from Princeton and ended up like this. All around him were pleasure kits, masturbators, dildos, pumps, restraints. Simon Conklin seemed right in his element.

"I'm starting to enjoy these unexpected visits from you assholes. I didn't at first, but now I'm getting into them," he said. "I remember you, Detective Sampson. But *you're* new to the traveling team. You must be Alex Cross's unworthy replacement."

"Not really," I said. "Just haven't felt like coming around to this shithole until now."

Conklin snorted, a phlegmy sound that wasn't quite a laugh. "You haven't felt like it. That means you have feelings that you occasionally act on. How quaint. Then you *must* be with the FBI's Criminal Investigative Analysis Program. Am I right?"

I looked away from him and checked out the rest of the store.

"Hi," I said to a man perusing a rack with Spanish Fly Powder, Sta-Hard, and the like. "Find anything you like today? Are you from the Princeton area? I'm Thomas Pierce with the FBI."

The man mumbled something unintelligible into his chin and then he scurried out, letting a blast of sunlight inside.

"Ouch. That's not nice," Conklin said. He snorted again, not quite a laugh.

"I'm not very nice sometimes," I said to him.

Conklin responded with a jaw-cracking yawn. "When Alex Cross got shot, I was with a friend all night. Your very thorough cohorts already spoke to my squeeze, Dana. We were at a party in Hopewell till around midnight. Lots and lots of witnesses."

I nodded, looked as bored as he did. "On another, more promising subject, tell me what happened to Gary's trains? The ones he stole from his stepbrother?"

Conklin wasn't smiling anymore. "Look, actually I'm getting a little tired of the bullshit. The repetition bores me and I'm not into ancient history. Gary and I were friends until we were around twelve years old. After that, we never spent time together. He had his friends, and so did I. *The end.* Now get the hell out of here."

I shook my head. "No, no, Gary never had any other friends. He only had time for the 'great ones.' He believed you were one of them. He told that to Alex Cross. I think you were Gary's friend until he died. That's why you hated Dr. Cross. You had a reason to attack his house. You had a motive, Conklin, and you're the *only* one who did."

Conklin snorted out of his nose and the side of his mouth again. "And if you can prove that, then I go directly to jail. I do not pass Go. But you can't prove it. *Dana. Hopewell. Several witnesses*. Bye-bye, assholes."

I walked out the front door of the adult bookstore. I stood in the blazing heat of the parking lot and waited for Sampson to catch up with me.

"What the hell is going on? Why did you just walk out like that?" he asked.

"Conklin is the leader," I said. "Soneji was *the follower."*

Chapter 101

I was aware that Simon Conklin might circle back behind me—if he was as bright as he thought he was. I wasn't worried about that. I had a working theory about Conklin and his visit to Cross's house. I needed to test it out.

I suddenly thought about Mr. Smith as I was picking the lock. *Smith was obsessed with studying people, with breaking and entering into their lives.*

The inside of the house was absolutely unbearable: Simon Conklin's place smelled like Salvation Army furniture laced with BO and immersed in a McDonald's deep fryer. No, it was actually worse than that. I held a handkerchief over my nose and mouth as I began to search the filthy lair. I was afraid that I might find a body in here. Anything was possible.

Every room and every object was coated with dust and grime. The best that could be said for Simon Conklin was that he was an avid reader. Volumes were spread open in every room, half a dozen on his bed alone.

He seemed to favor sociology, philosophy, and psychology: Marx, Jung, Bruno Bettelheim, Malraux, Jean Baudrillard. Three unpainted floor-to-ceiling bookcases were crammed with books piled horizontally. My initial impression of the place was that it had already been ransacked by someone.

All of this fit with what had really happened at Alex Cross's house.

Over Conklin's rumpled, unmade bed was a framed Vargas girl, signed by the model, with a lipstick kiss next to the butt.

A rifle was stashed under the bed. It was a BAR—the same model Browning Gary Soneji had used in Washington. A smile slowly broke across my face.

Simon Conklin knew the rifle was circumstantial evidence, that it proved nothing about his guilt or innocence. *He wanted it found. He wanted Cross's badge found. He liked to play games. Of course he did.*

I climbed down creaking wooden stairs to the basement. I kept the house lights off and used only my penlight.

There were no windows in the cellar. There were dust and cobwebs, and a loudly dripping sink. Curled photographic prints were clipped to strings dangling from the ceiling.

My heart was beating in double time. I examined the dangling pictures. They were photos of Simon Conklin himself, different pics of the auteur cavorting in the buff. They appeared to have been taken inside the house.

I shined the light haphazardly around the basement, glancing everywhere. The floor was dirt and there were large rocks on which the old house was built. Ancient medical equipment was stored: a walker, an aluminum-framed potty, an oxygen tank with hoses and

gauges still attached, a glucose monitor.

My eyes trailed over to the far side, the southern wall of the house. *Gary Soneji's train set!*

I was in the house of Gray's best friend, his only friend in the world, the man who had attacked Alex Cross and his family in Washington. I was certain of it. I was certain I had solved the case.

I was better than Alex Cross.

There, I've said it.

The truth begins.

Who is the cat? Who is the mouse?

Part Five

Chapter 102

along with John Sampson and Sondra Greenberg from Interpol. “Alex didn’t want to go this way. Actually, he didn’t want any involvement at all, if my memory serves me.”

“That’s right, but now I am involved. I’m in this up to my eyebrows. Soon you will be, too. Kyle and I are going to tell you everything.”

I took a breath, then I continued. My nervousness was mostly gone.

“Four years ago, a recent Harvard Medical School grad named Thomas Pierce discovered his girlfriend murdered in their apartment in Cambridge. That was the police finding at the time. It was later corroborated by the Bureau. Let me tell you about the actual murder. Now let me tell you what Kyle and I believe really happened. This is how it went down that night in Cambridge.”

Chapter 103

operations, too. He couldn't breathe very well out of the right nostril.

Thomas Pierce knew this. He had *studied* Straw, tried to understand him, his so-called humanity.

Pierce knew he had to act now, knew that he couldn't take too much time.

He fell on Isabella with all his weight, his force, his power. His tools were ready. She struggled, but he held her down. He clutched her long swanlike throat with his strong hands. He wedged his feet under the mattress for leverage.

The struggle exposed her bare breasts and he was reminded of how "sexy" and "absolutely beautiful" Isabella was; how they were "perfect together"; "Cambridge's very own Romeo and Juliet." What bullshit it was. A sorry myth. The perception of people who couldn't see straight. She didn't really love him, but how he had loved her. Isabella made him *feel* for the one and only time in his life.

Thomas Pierce looked down at her. Isabella's eyes were like sandblasted mirrors. Her small, beautiful mouth fell open to one side. Her skin still felt satin soft to his touch.

She was helpless now, but she could see what was happening. Isabella was aware of her crimes and the punishment to come.

"I don't know what I'm doing," he finally said. "It's as if I'm outside myself, watching. And yet… I can't tell you how alive I feel right now."

Every newspaper, the news magazines, TV, and radio reported what happened in gruesome detail, but nothing like what really happened, what it was like in the bedroom, staring into Isabella's eyes as he murdered her.

He cut out Isabella's heart.

He held her heart in his hands, still pumping, still alive, and watched it die.

Then he impaled her heart on a spear from his scuba equipment.

He *"pierced"* her heart. That was the clue he left. The very first clue.

He had the feeling, the sixth sense, that he actually watched Isabella's spirit leave her body. Then he thought he felt his own soul depart. He believed that he died that night, too.

Smith was born from death that night in Cambridge.

Thomas Pierce was Mr. Smith.

Chapter 104

Sampson has been in on the ruse, too," he explained.

A few hours earlier, Sampson had been with Pierce in New Jersey. He knew him better than I did, though not as well as Kyle or Sondra Greenberg of Interpol, who had originally profiled Pierce, and was with us now at Quantico.

"How is he acting, Sondra?" Kyle asked Greenberg. "What have you noticed?"

The Interpol inspector was a tall, impressive-looking woman. She'd been working the case for nearly two years in Europe. "Thomas Pierce is an arrogant bastard. Believe me, he's laughing at all of us. He's one hundred percent sure of himself. He's also high-strung. He never stops looking over his shoulder. Sometimes, I don't think he's human either. I do believe he's going to blow soon. The pressure we've applied is working."

"That's becoming more evident," said Kyle, picking up the thread. "Pierce was very cool in the beginning. He had everyone fooled. He was as professional as any agent we've ever had. Early on, no one in the Cambridge police believed he had murdered Isabella Calais. He never made a mistake. His grief over her death was astonishing."

"He's for real, ladies and gents." Sampson spoke up again. "He's smart as hell. Pretty good investigator, too. His instincts are sharp and he's disciplined. He did his homework, and he went right to Simon Conklin. I think he's competing with Alex."

"So do I," said Kyle, nodding at Sampson. "He's very complex. We probably don't know the half of it yet. That's what scares me."

Kyle had come to me about Mr. Smith before the Soneji shooting spree had started. We had talked again when I'd taken Rosie to Quantico for tests. I worked with him on an unofficial basis. I helped with the profile on Thomas Pierce, along with Sondra Greenberg. When I was shot at my house, Kyle rushed to Washington out of concern. But the attack was nowhere near as bad as everyone thought, or as we led them to believe.

It was Kyle who decided to take a big chance. So far, Pierce was running free. Maybe if he brought him in on the case, on *my* case?

It would be a way to watch him, to put pressure on Pierce. Kyle believed that Pierce wouldn't be able to resist. Big ego, tremendous confidence. Kyle was right.

"Pierce is going to blow," Sondra Greenberg said again. "I'm telling you. I don't know everything that's going on in his head, but he's close to the limit."

I agreed with Greenberg. "I'll tell you what could happen next. The two personas are starting to fuse. Mr. Smith and Thomas Pierce could merge soon. Actually, it's the Thomas Pierce part of his personality that seems to be diminishing. I think he just might have

Mr. Smith take out Simon Conklin."

Sampson leaned into me and whispered. "I think it's time that you met Mr. Pierce *and* Mr. Smith."

Chapter 105

surveillance team, but we stayed close. We were never more than a mile, or at most two, from Pierce. Sampson was restless and irritable through the early night. It had gotten excruciatingly personal between him and Pierce.

I had a very personal reason to be in Princeton myself. I wanted a crack at Simon Conklin. Unfortunately, Pierce was between me and Conklin for now.

We were a few blocks from the Marriott in town where Pierce was staying.

"Quite a plan," Sampson mumbled as we sat and waited.

"The FBI tried just about everything else. Kyle thinks this will work. He feels Pierce couldn't resist solving the attack on my house. It's the ultimate competition for him. Who knows?"

Sampson's eyes narrowed. I knew the look—sharp, comprehending. "Yeah, and you had no part in any of the hinky shit, right?"

"Maybe I did offer a suggestion about why the setup might be attractive to Thomas Pierce, to his huge ego. Or why he might be cocky enough to get caught."

Sampson rolled his eyes back into his forehead, the way he'd been doing since we were about ten years old. "Yeah, maybe you did. By the way, he's an even bigger pain in the ass than you are to work with. Anal as shit, to coin a phrase."

We waited on the side street in Princeton as night blanketed the university town. It was déjá vu all over again. John Sampson and Alex Cross on stakeout duty.

"You still love me," Sampson said and grinned. He doesn't get giddy too often, but when he does—watch out. "You do love me, Sugar?"

I put my hand high on his thigh. "Sure do, big fellow."

He punched me in the shoulder—*hard*. My arm went numb. My fingers tingled. The man can *hit*.

"I want to put the hurt on Thomas Pierce! I'm going to put the hurt on Pierce!" Sampson yelled out in the car.

"Put the hurt on Thomas Pierce," I yelled with him. "And Mr. Smith, too!"

"Put the hurt on Mr. Smith and Mr. Pierce," we sang in unison, doing our imitation of the *Bad Boys* movie.

Yeah!

We were back. Same as it ever was.

Chapter 106

"That's what they all say," Thomas Pierce said and shoved him. Conklin stumbled down a couple of stairs.

"You think I'm afraid of you?" Conklin whirled and snarled. "I'm not afraid of you."

Pierce nodded his head once and cocked an eyebrow. "I hear you, and I'm going to straighten that out right now."

He shoved Conklin hard again and watched him tumble down the rest of the stairs. Pierce walked slowly down toward the heap. "You *starting* to get afraid of me now?" he asked.

He whacked Conklin with the side of the Magnum and watched as blood spit from Simon Conklin's head. "You starting to get afraid now?"

He bent down and put his mouth close to Conklin's hairy ear.

"You don't understand very much about pain. I know that about you," he whispered. "You don't have much in the way of guts either. You were the one in the Cross house, but you *couldn't* kill Alex Cross, could you? You *couldn't* kill his family. You punked out at his house. You blew it. That's what I *already know*."

Thomas Pierce was enjoying the confrontation, the satisfaction of it. He was curious about what made Simon Conklin tick. He wanted to "study" Conklin, to understand his humanity. To know Simon Conklin was to know something about himself.

He stayed in Conklin's face. "First, I want you to *tell* me that you're the one who snuck into Alex Cross's house. *You did it!* Now just tell me you did it. What you say here will *not* be held against you, and will *not* be used in a court of law. It's just between us."

Simon Conklin looked at him as if he were a complete madman. *How perceptive.*

"You're crazy. You can't do this. This won't matter in court," Conklin squealed.

Pierce's eyes widened in disbelief. He looked at Conklin as if *he* were the madman. "Didn't I just say precisely that? Weren't you listening? Am I talking to myself here? No, it won't matter in *their* court. This is *my* court. So far, you're losing your case, Simple Simon. You're smart, though. I'm confident you can do a much better job over the next few hours."

Simon Conklin gasped. A shiny, stainless-steel scalpel was pointed at his chest.

CHAPTER 107

LOOK AT ME! Would you focus on what I'm saying, Simon. I'm not another gray suit from the FBI—I have important questions to ask. I want you to answer them truthfully. You were the one at Cross's house! You attacked Cross. Let's proceed from there."

With a swift move of his left arm, Pierce pulled Conklin roughly up off the cellar floor. His physical strength was a shock to Conklin.

Pierce put his scalpel down and hog-tied Conklin to the cot with rope.

Pierce leaned in close to Simon Conklin once he was tied down and helpless. "Here's a news flash—I don't like your superior attitude. Believe me, *you aren't superior*. Somehow, and this amazes me, I don't think I've made myself clear yet. You're a *specimen*, Simon. Let me show you something creepy."

"Don't!" Conklin screeched. He was helpless as Pierce made a sudden incision in the upper chest. He couldn't believe what was happening. Simon Conklin screamed.

"Can you concentrate better now, Simon? See what's on the table here? It's your tape recorder. I just want you to confess. Tell me what happened inside Dr. Cross's house. I want to hear everything."

"Leave me alone," Conklin whispered weakly.

"No! That's not going to happen. You will never be alone again. All right, forget the scalpel and the tape recorder. I want you to focus on *this*. Ordinary can of Coca-Cola. *Your Coke*, Simon."

He shook the bright red can, shook it up good, and popped it open. Then he pulled Conklin's head back. Grabbed a handful of long, greasy hair. Pierce pushed the harmless-looking can under Conklin's nostrils.

The soda exploded upward, fizz, bubbles, sugary-brown water. It shot up Conklin's nose and toward the brain. It was an army interrogator's trick. Excruciatingly painful, and it always worked.

Simon Conklin choked horribly. He couldn't stop coughing, gagging.

"I hope you appreciate the kind of resourcefulness I'm showing. I can work with any household object. Are you ready to confess? Or

would you like some more Coke?"

Simon Conklin's eyes were wider than they had ever been before. "I'll *say* whatever you want! Just please stop."

Thomas Pierce shook his head back and forth. "I just want the truth. I want the facts. I want to know I solved the case that Alex Cross couldn't."

He turned on the tape recorder and held it under Conklin's bearded chin. "Tell me what happened."

"I was the one who attacked Cross and his family. Yes, yes, it was me," Simon Conklin said in a choked voice that made each word sound even more emotional. "Gary made me. He said if I didn't, somebody would come for me. They'd torture and kill me. Somebody he knew from Lorton Prison. That's the truth, I swear it is. Gary was the leader, not me!"

Thomas Pierce was suddenly almost tender, his voice soft and soothing. "I knew that, Simon. I'm not stupid. I knew that Gary made you do it. Now, when you got to the Cross house, you couldn't kill him, could you? You'd fantasized about it, but then you couldn't do it."

Simon Conklin nodded. He was exhausted and frightened. He wondered if Gary had sent this madman and thought that maybe he had.

Pierce motioned with the Coke can for him to keep going. He took a hit of the Coke as he listened. "Go on, Simon. Tell me all about you and Gary."

Conklin was crying, bawling like a child, but he was talking. "We got beat up a lot when we were kids. We were inseparable. I was there when Gary burned down his own house. His stepmother was inside with her two kids. So was his father. I watched over the two kids he kidnapped in D.C. I was the one at Cross's house. You were right! It might as well have been Gary. He planned everything."

Pierce finally took away the tape player and shut it off. "That's much better, Simon. I do believe you."

What Simon Conklin had just said seemed like a good break point —somewhere to end. The investigation was over. He'd proved he was better than Alex Cross.

"I'm going to tell you something. Something amazing, Simon. You'll appreciate this, I think."

He raised the scalpel and Simon Conklin tried to squirm away. He knew what was coming.

"Gary Soneji was a pussycat compared to me," Thomas Pierce said. *"I'm Mr. Smith."*

Chapter 108

blue mattress on the floor. The man who had attacked me and my family had been mutilated. Thanks to countless anatomy classes at John Hopkins, I was better prepared than the others for the gruesome murder scene. Simon Conklin's chest, stomach, and pelvic area had been cut open, as if a crackerjack medical examiner had just performed an on-the-scene autopsy.

"He's been gutted," an FBI agent muttered, and turned away from the body. "Why in the name of God?"

Simon Conklin had no face. A bold incision had been made at the top of his skull. The cut went through the scalp and clear down to the bone. Then the scalp had been pulled down over the front of the face.

Conklin's long black hair hung from his scalp to where the chin should have been. It looked like a beard. I suspected that this meant something to Pierce. *What did obliterating a face mean to him, if anything.*

There was an unpainted wooden door in the cellar, another way out, but none of the agents stationed outside had seen him leave. Several agents were trying to chase down Pierce. I stayed inside with the mutilated corpse. I couldn't have run down Nana Mama right then. For the first time in my life, I understood what it would be like to be physically old.

"He did this in just a couple of minutes?" Kyle Craig asked. "Alex, could he work this fast?"

"If he's crazy as I think he is, yeah, he could have. Don't forget he did this in med school, not to mention his other victims. He has to be incredibly strong, Kyle. He didn't have morgue tools, no electric saws. He used a knife, and his hands."

I was standing close to the mattress, staring down at what remained of Simon Conklin. I thought of the cowardly attack on me, on my family. I'd wanted him caught, but not like this. Nobody deserved this. Only in Dante were such fierce punishments imposed on the damned.

I leaned in closer and peered at the remains of Simon Conklin. *Why was Thomas Pierce so angry at Conklin? Why had he punished Conklin like this?*

The basement of the house was eerily quiet. Sondra Greenberg looked pale, and was leaning against a cellar wall. I would have thought she'd be used to the murder scenes, but maybe that wasn't possible for anybody.

I had to clear my throat before I could speak again. "He cut away the front quadrant of the skull," I said. "He performed a frontal craniotomy. It looks like Thomas Pierce is practicing medicine again."

Chapter 109

"Yeah, he probably is," I agreed. "He's definitely competitive on some level. He likes to feel superior. There's a whole lot more to this, though."

I had been thinking about the possibility of some kind of abstract or artistic pattern since I'd first heard about the complicated case. I was well aware of the theory that each of the murders was different, and worse, seemed arbitrary. That would make Pierce almost impossible to catch. The more I thought about the series of murders, though, and especially about Thomas Pierce's history, the more I suspected that there had to be pattern, a mission behind all of this. The FBI had simply missed it. Now I was missing it, too.

"What do you want to do, Alex?" Kyle finally asked. "I understand if you're not going to work this one, if you're not up to it."

I thought about my family back home, about Christine Johnson and the things we'd talked over, but I didn't see how I could step away from this awful case right now. I was also somewhat afraid of retribution from Pierce. There was no way to predict how he might react now.

"I'll stay with you for a few days. I'll be around, Kyle. No promises beyond that. Shit, I *hate* that I said that. Damn it!" I pounded the table and the plates and flatware jumped.

For the first time that morning, Kyle offered up half a smile. "So, what's your plan? Tell me what you're going to do."

I shook my head back and forth. I still couldn't believe I was doing this. "My plan is as follows. I'm going home to Washington, and that's nonnegotiable. Tomorrow or the next day, I'll fly up to Boston. I want to see Pierce's apartment. He wanted to see my house, didn't he? Then, we'll see, Kyle. Please keep your evidence gatherers on a leash before I get to his apartment. *Look, photograph*, but don't move anything around. Mr. Smith is a very orderly man. I want to see how Pierce's place looks, how he arranged it for us."

Kyle was back to the deadpan look, superserious, which I actually prefer. "We're not going to get him, Alex. He's been given a warning. He'll be more careful from now on. Maybe he'll disappear like some killers do, just vanish off the face of the earth."

"That would be nice," I said, "but I don't think it's going to happen. There *is* a pattern, Kyle. We just haven't found it."

Chapter 110

too. Was Pierce trying to tell us, or maybe tell himself, that he felt absolutely nothing—no guilt, no sadness, no love in his heart?

As I thought about it, I was overwhelmed with sadness myself. I could imagine the torture that must be his life every day—never to experience real love or deep feelings. In his crazed mind did Pierce think that by dissecting each of his victims he would find the answer to himself?

Maybe the opposite was true.

Was it possible that Pierce needed to *feel* her presence, to feel everything with the greatest intensity imaginable? Had Thomas Pierce loved Isabella Calais more than he'd thought he was capable of loving anyone? Had Pierce felt redeemed by their love? When he'd learned of her affair with a doctor named Martin Straw, had it driven him to madness and the most unspeakable of acts: the murder of the only person he had ever loved?

Why were her pictures still looming everywhere in the apartment? Why had Thomas Pierce been torturing himself with this constant reminder?

Isabella Calais was watching me as I moved through every room in the apartment. What was she trying to say?

"Who is he, Isabella?" I whispered. "What is he up to?"

Chapter 111

Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Heidegger, Habermas, Sartre.

There were several dictionaries as well: French, German, English, Italian, and Spanish. A compact, two-volume set of the *Oxford English Dictionary* had type so small it came with a magnifying glass.

There was a framed diagram of the human voice mechanism directly over Pierce's work desk. And a quote: *"Language is more than speech."* Several books by the linguist and activist Noam Chomsky were on his desk. What I remembered about Chomsky was that he had suggested a complex biological component of language acquisition. He had a view of the mind as a set of mental organs. I *think* that was Chomsky.

I wondered what, if anything, Noam Chomsky or the diagram of the human voice mechanism had to do with Smith, or the death of Isabella Calais.

I was lost in my thoughts, when I was startled by a loud *buzzing* noise. It came from the kitchen at the other end of the hall.

I thought I was alone in the apartment, and the buzzing spooked me. I took my Glock from its shoulder holster and started down the long narrow hallway. Then I began to run.

I entered the kitchen with my gun in position and then understood what the buzzing was. I had brought along a PowerBook that Pierce had left in his hotel room in Princeton. *Left on purpose? Left as another clue?* A special alarm on the laptop personal computer was the source of the noise.

Had he sent a message to us? A fax or voice mail? Or perhaps someone was sending a message to Pierce? Who would be sending him messages?

I checked voice mail first. *It was Pierce*.

His voice was strong and steady and almost soothing. It was the voice of someone in control of himself and the situation. It was eerie under the circumstances, to be hearing it alone in his apartment.

> *Dr. Cross—at least I suspect it's you I've reached. This is the kind of message I used to receive when I was tracking Smith.*
>
> *Of course, I was using the messages for misdirection, sending them myself. I wanted to mislead the police, the FBI. Who knows, maybe I still do.*
>
> *At any rate, here's your very first message-Anthony Bruno, Brielle, New Jersey.*
>
> *Why don't you come to the seashore and join me for a swim? Have you arrived at any conclusions about Isabella yet? She is important to all of this. You're right to be in Cambridge.*

CHAPTER 112

FBI says Mr. Smith is disorganized, chaotic, unpredictable, I scribbled in my pad.

What if they're wrong? Pierce is responsible for much of their data about Smith. Pierce created Mr. Smith, then did the profile on him.

I kept revisiting his and Isabella's apartment in my mind. The place was so very neat and organized. The home had a definite *organizing principle*. It revolved around Isabella—her pictures, clothes, even her perfume bottles had been left in place. The smell of L'Air du Temps and Je Reviens permeated their bedroom to this day.

Thomas Pierce had loved her. *Pierce had loved*. Pierce had felt passion and emotion. That was another thing the FBI was wrong about. He'd killed because he thought he was losing her, and he couldn't bear it. Was Isabella the only person who had ever loved Pierce?

Another small piece of the puzzle suddenly fell into place! I was so struck by it that I said it aloud in the helicopter. "*Her heart on a spear!*"

He had "pierced" her heart! Jesus Christ! He had confessed to the very first murder! He had confessed!

He'd left a clue, but the police missed it. What else were we missing? What was he up to now? What did "Mr. Smith" represent inside his mind? Was everything representational for him? Symbolic? Artistic? Was he creating a kind of language for us to follow? Or was it even simpler? He had "pierced" her heart. Pierce wanted to be caught. Caught and punished.

Crime and punishment.

Why couldn't we catch him?

I landed in New Jersey around five at night. Kyle Craig was waiting for me. Kyle was sitting on the hood of a dark blue Town Car. He was drinking Samuel Adams beer out of a bottle.

"You find Anthony Bruno yet?" I called out as I walked toward him. "You find the body?"

Chapter 113

surely have “numbers,” meaning excessive force, their trademark maneuver. They would be all over the airports, probably expecting him to head back to Europe. And what about the wild cards in the search, people like Alex Cross? Cross had made his bones, no doubt about that. Maybe Cross was more than he seemed to be. At any rate, he relished the thought of Dr. Cross being in on this, too. He liked the competition.

The dead weight on his back and shoulder was starting to get heavy. It was almost morning, close to daybreak. It wouldn’t do to be found lugging a disemboweled corpse across Point Pleasant Beach.

He carried Anthony Bruno another fifty yards to a glistening white lifeguard’s chair. He climbed the creaking rungs of the chair, and propped the body in the seat.

The remains of the corpse were naked and exposed for the world to see. Quite a sight. *Anthony was a clue*. If anybody on the search team had half a brain and was using it properly.

“I’m not an alien. Do any of you follow that?” Pierce shouted above the ocean’s steady roar.

“I’m human. I’m perfectly normal. I’m just like you.”

Chapter 114

Why was Thomas Pierce killing all of these people?
He was “impeccable,” wasn’t he.

Chapter 115

Chapter 116

Greenberg from Interpol worked with us, too. She was seriously jet-lagged, and had deep circles under her eyes, but she knew Pierce and had been at most of the European murder sites.

"He's not a goddamn split personality?" Sampson asked. "Smith and Pierce?"

I shook my head. "He seems to be in control of his faculties at all times. He created 'Smith' to serve some other purpose."

"I agree with Alex," Sondra Greenberg said from across the table, "but *what* is the sodding purpose?"

"Whatever it was, it worked," Kyle joined in. "He had us chasing Mr. Smith halfway around the world. We're still chasing. No one has ever jerked around the Bureau like this."

"Not even the great J. Edgar Hoover?" Sondra said and winked.

"Well," Kyle softened, "as a pure psychopath, Hoover was in a class by himself."

I was up and pacing again. My side was hurting, but I didn't want anyone to know about it. They would try to send me home, make me miss the fun. I let myself ramble—sometimes it works.

"He's trying to tell us something. He's communicating in some strange way. *Inez*? The name reminds us of Isabella. He's obsessed with Isabella. You should see the apartment in Cambridge. Is Inez a substitute for Isabella? Is Atlantic City a substitute for Laguna Beach? Has he brought Isabella home? Why bring Isabella home?"

It went on and on like that: wild hunches, free association, insecurity, fear, unbearable frustration. As far as I could tell nothing worthwhile was said all day and late into the night, but who could really tell.

Pierce didn't try to make further contact. There were no more voice-mail messages. That surprised us a little. Kyle was afraid he'd moved on, and that he would keep moving until he drove us completely insane. Six of us stayed in the field office throughout the night and into the early morning. We slept in our clothes, on chairs, tables, and the floor.

I paced inside the office, and occasionally outside on the glittery, fog-laden boardwalk. As a last desperate resort, I bought a bag of Fralinger's salt water taffy and tried to get sick to my stomach.

What kind of logic system is he using? Mr. Smith is his creation, his Mr. Hyde. What is Smith's mission? Why is he here? I wondered, occasionally talking to myself as I strolled the mostly deserted boardwalk.

Inez is Isabella?

It couldn't be that simple. Pierce wouldn't make it simple for us.

Inez is not Isabella. There was only one Isabella. So why does Pierce keep killing again and again?

I found myself at the corner of Park Place and Boardwalk, and that finally brought a smile. *Monopoly. Another kind of game? Is that it*?

I wandered back to the FBI field office and got some sleep. But not nearly enough. A few hours at most.

Pierce was here.

So was Mr. Smith.

Chapter 117

ahead, where you could see a lock of George Washington's hair, and a roulette table made of jelly beans. No, *I could not believe it.* I didn't think anyone on the crisis team could, but here we were.

I was jolted out of my thoughts by the beeper vibrating against my leg. I ran to a nearby phone and called in.

Pierce had left another message. Kyle and Sampson were already out on the boardwalk. Pierce was near the Steel Pier. He claimed that Inez was with him! *He said we could still save them!*

Pierce specifically said *them.*

I shouldn't have been running around like this. My side began to throb and hurt like hell. I'd never been out of shape like this, not in my life, and I didn't like the feeling. I hadn't felt so vulnerable and relatively helpless before.

Finally, I realized: *I'm actually afraid of Pierce, and of Mr. Smith.*

By the time I got near the Steel Pier, my clothes were dripping wet and I was breathing hard. I pulled off my sport shirt and waded out into the crowd bare-chested. I pushed my way past old-style jitneys and newer step vans, past tandem bikes and joggers.

I was taped and bandaged and I must have looked like an escapee from a local ER. Even so, it was hard to stand out on a beach like the one at Atlantic City. An ice-cream man hauling a box on his shoulder cried out, "Hitch your tongue to a sleigh ride! Get your Fudgie Wudgies here!"

Was Thomas Pierce watching us and laughing? He could be the ice-cream man, or anyone else in this frenetic mob scene.

I cupped my hands over my eyes and looked up and down the beach. I spotted policeman and FBI agents moving into the crowd. There must have been at least fifty thousand sunbathers on the beach. I could faintly hear electronic bells from the slot machines in one of the nearby hotels.

Inez. Atlantic City. Jesus!

A madman on the loose near the famous Steel Pier.

I looked for Sampson or Kyle, but I didn't see either of them. I searched for Pierce, and for Inez, and for Mr. Smith.

I heard a loud voice, and it stopped me in my tracks. *"This is the FBI."*

Chapter 118

They were bending over something. *Oh God, Oh God, no. Inez, Atlantic City!* My pulse raced out of control.

This was not good.

A dark-haired teenage girl was sobbing against an older man's chest. Others gawked at the dead body, which had been clumsily wrapped in beach blankets. I couldn't imagine how it had gotten here—but there it was.

Inez, Atlantic City. It had to be her.

The murdered woman had long bleach blond hair and looked to be in her early twenties. It was hard to tell now. Her skin was purplish and waxy. The eyes had flattened because of a loss of fluid. Her lips and nail beds were pale. He had operated on Inez: The ribs and cartilage had been cut away, exposing her lungs, esophagus, trachea, and heart.

Inez sounds like Isabella.

Pierce knew that.

He hadn't taken out Inez's heart.

The ovaries and fallopian tubes were neatly laid out beside the body. The tubes looked like a set of earrings and a necklace.

Suddenly, sunbathers were pointing to something out over the ocean.

I turned and I looked up, shading my eyes with one hand.

A prop plane was lazily making its way down the shoreline from the north. It was the kind of plane you rented for commercial messages. Most of the messages on forty-foot banners hyped the hotels, local bars, area restaurants, and casinos.

A banner waved behind the sputtering plane, which was getting closer and closer. I couldn't believe what I was reading. It was another message.

Mr. Smith is gone for now! Wave good-bye.

Chapter 119

"Talk to me," I said. "My time is your time. Daddy's home."

"For today." She sent a hummer right past my ear, brushed me right back from home plate with a high, hard one.

"It's not easy being green," I said. It was an old favorite line between us, compliments of Kermit the Frog. She shrugged it off today. No sale. No easy deals.

"You and Damon mad at me?" I asked in my most soothing tones. "Tell me the truth, girlfriend."

She softened a little. "Oh, it's not so much that, Daddy. You're doing the best you can," she said, and finally looked my way. "You're trying, right? It's just hard when you go away from home. I get lonely for you. It's not the same when you're away."

I shook my head, smiled, and wondered where she got much of her thinking from. Nana Mama swears that Jannie has a mind of her own.

"You okay with our dinner plans?" I asked, treading carefully.

"Oh *ab*-solutely." She suddenly beamed. "That's not a problem at all. I *love* dinner parties."

"Damon? Is he okay with Christine coming over tonight?" I asked my confidante.

"He's a little scared 'cause she's the principal of our school. But he's cool, too. You know Damon. He's the man."

I nodded. "He *is* cool. So dinner's not a problem? You're not even a little scared?"

Jannie shook her head. "Nope. Not because of that. Dinners can't scare me. Dinner is dinner."

Man, she was smart, and so subtle for her age. It was like talking to a very wise adult. She was already a poet, and a philosopher, too. She was going to be competition for Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison one day. I loved that about her.

"Do you have to keep going after him? After this bum Mr. Smith?" Jannie finally asked me. "I guess you do." She answered her own question.

I echoed her earlier line. "I'm doing the best I can."

Jannie stood up on her tippy-toes. I bent low to her, but not as far as I used to. She kissed me on the cheek, a nice *smacker*, as she calls the kisses.

"You're the bee's knees," she said. It was one of Nana's favorite things to say and she'd adopted it.

"Boo!" Damon peeked around the soda-pop aisle at the two of us. His head was framed against a red, white, and blue sea of Pepsi bottles and cans. I pulled Damon close, and I kissed him on the cheek, too. I kissed the top of his head, held him in a way I would have liked my father to have held me a long time ago. We made a little spectacle

of ourselves in the grocery-store aisle. Nice spectacle.

God, I loved the two of them, and what a continued dilemma it presented. The Glock on my ankle weighed a ton and felt as hot as a poker from a fire. I wanted to take it off and never put the weapon on again.

I knew I wouldn't, though. Thomas Pierce was still out there somewhere, and Mr. Smith, and all the rest of them. For some reason I felt it was my responsibility to make them all go away, to make things a little safer for everyone.

"Earth to Daddy," Jannie said. She had a small frown on her face. "See? You went away again. You were with Mr. Smith, weren't you?"

CHAPTER 120

naked, except for the fine rope necklace with a fire opal around her neck. I remembered a poem, something magical about the nakedness of lovers, but with just a touch of jewelry to set it off. Baudelaire? I bit gently into her shoulder. She bit back.

I was so hard it hurt, but the pain was exquisite, the pain had its own raw power. I loved this woman completely, and I was also turned on by her, every inch of her being.

"You know," I whispered, "you're driving me a little crazy."

"Oh. Just a little?"

I let my lips trail down along her breasts, her stomach. She was lightly scented with perfume. I kissed between her legs and she began to gently call my name, then not so gently. I entered Christine as we stood against the cream living room wall, as we seemed to push our bodies *into* the wall.

"I love you," I whispered.

"I love you, Alex."

She was strong and gentle and graceful, all at the same time. We danced, but not in the metaphorical sense. We really *danced*.

I loved the sound of her voice, the softest cry, the song she sang when she was with me like this.

Then I was singing, too. I had found my voice again, for the first time in many years. I don't know how long we were like that. Time wasn't part of this. Something in it was eternal, and something was so very real and right now in the present.

Christine and I were soaking wet. Even the wall behind me was slippery and wet. The wild ride at the beginning, the rocking and rolling, had transformed itself into a slower rhythm that was even stronger. I knew that no life was right without this kind of passion.

I was barely moving inside her. She tightened around me and I thought I could feel the edges of her. I surged deeper and Christine seemed to swell around me. We began to move into each other, trying to get closer. We shuddered, and got closer still.

Christine climaxed, and then the two of us came together. We danced and we sang. I felt myself melting into Christine and we were both whispering *yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes*. No one could touch us here, not Thomas Pierce, no one.

"Hey, did I tell you I loved you?"

"Yes, but tell me again."

CHAPTER 121

and were cleaning up the kitchen.

I was washing dishes in the sink, and as I reached to get another plate I stopped in midturn, frozen in the moment.

Jannie was in Christine's arms, and the two of them looked just beautiful together. I had no idea how she had gotten there, but they were both laughing and it was so natural and real. As I never had before, I knew and understood that Jannie and Damon were missing so much without a mother.

Joy—that's the word. So easy to say, so hard to find in life sometimes.

In the morning, I had to go back to work.

I was still the dragon slayer.

CHAPTER 122

Chapter 123

"I have a game plan," I said, and left it at that.

"You better have a winning game plan." Nana got the last word in. "Alex, if you lose her, you will never get over it."

The walk with the kids and even talking with Nana revitalized me. I felt clear and alert as I worked at my old rolltop for the rest of the morning.

I had started to cover the bedroom walls with notes and theories, and the beginnings of *even more theories* about Thomas Pierce. The pushpin parade had taken control. From the looks of the room, it seemed as if I knew what I was doing, but contrary to popular opinion, looks are almost always deceiving. I had hundreds of clues, and yet I didn't have a clue.

I remembered something Mr. Smith had written in one of his messages to Pierce, which Pierce had then passed on to the FBI. *The god within us is the one that gives the laws and can change the laws. And God is within us.*

The words had seemed familiar to me, and I finally tracked down the source. The quote was from Joseph Campbell, the American mythologist and folklorist who had taught at Harvard when Pierce was a student there.

I was trying different perspectives to the puzzle. Two entry points in particular interested me.

First, Pierce was curious about language. He had studied linguistics at Harvard. He admired Noam Chomsky. What about language and words, then?

Second, Pierce was extremely organized. He had created the false impression that Mr. Smith was disorganized. He had purposely misled the FBI and Interpol.

Pierce was leaving clues from the start. Some of them were obvious.

He wants to be caught. So why doesn't he stop himself?

Murder. Punishment. Was Thomas Pierce punishing himself, or was he punishing everybody else? Right now, he was certainly punishing the hell out of me. Maybe I deserved it.

Around three o'clock, I took a stroll and picked up Damon and Jannie at the Sojourner Truth School. Not that they needed someone to walk them home. I just missed the hell out of them. I needed to see them, couldn't keep myself away.

Besides, my head ached and I wanted to get out of the house, away from all of my thoughts.

I saw Christine in the schoolyard. She was surrounded by little children. I remembered that she wanted to have kids herself. She looked so happy, and I could see that the kids loved to be around her. Who in their right mind wouldn't. She made it look so natural to be turning jump rope in a navy business suit.

She smiled when she saw me approaching across the schoolyard full of kids. The smile warmed the cockles of my heart, and all my other cockles as well.

"Look who's taking a break for air," she said, "three potato, four."

"When I was in high school," I told her as she continued to turn her end of a Day-Glo pink jump rope, "I had a girlfriend over at John Carroll. This was in my sophomore and junior years."

"Mmm, hmmm. Nice Catholic girl? White blouse, plaid skirt, saddle shoes?"

"She was very nice. Actually, she's a botanist now. See, nice? I used to walk all the way over to South Carolina Avenue just on the off chance I might see Jeanne for a couple of minutes after she finished school. I was seriously smitten."

"Must have been the saddle shoes. Are you trying to tell me that you're smitten again?" Christine laughed. The kids couldn't quite hear us, but they were laughing anyway.

"I am way beyond smitten. I am smote."

"Well that's good," she said and continued to turn the pink rope and smile at her kids, "because so am I. And when this case is over, Alex—"

"Anything you want, just say the word."

Her eyes brightened even more than was usual. "A weekend away from everything. Maybe at a country inn, but anywhere remote will do just fine."

I wanted to hold Christine so much. I wanted to kiss her right there, but that wasn't going to happen in the crowded schoolyard.

"It's a date," I said. "It's a promise."

"I'll hold you to it. *Smote*, that's good. We can try that on our weekend away."

Chapter 124

misfortunes? *No, that wasn't it.*

What the hell was the key to his code? If he wanted to drive all of us mad, it was working.

I began to play with the names of the victims, starting with Isabella and ending with Inez. *I* goes full circle to *I*? Full circle? Circles? I looked at the clock on the desk—it was almost one-thirty in the morning, but I kept at it.

I wrote—*I.*

I. Was that something? It could be a start. The personal pronoun *I*? I tried a few combinations with the letters of the names.

I-S-U… R

C-A-D…

I-A-D…

I stopped after the next three letters: IMU. I stared at the page. I remembered *pierced*, the obviousness of it. The simplest wordplay.

Isabella, Michaela, Ursula. Those were names of the first three victims—in order. *Jesus Christ!*

I looked at the names of all the victims—in order of the murders. I looked at the first, last, and middle names. I began mixing and matching the names. My heart was pounding. There was something here. Pierce had left us another clue, a series of clues, actually.

It was right there in front of us all the time. No one got it, because Smith's crimes appeared to be without any pattern. But Pierce had started that theory himself.

I continued to write, using either the first or last or middle names of the victims. It started IMU. Then *R*, for Robert. *D* for Dwyer. Was there a subpattern for selecting the name? It could be an arithmetic sequence.

There was a pattern to Pierce-Smith, after all. His mission began that very first night in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He *was* insane, but I had caught on to his pattern. It started with his love of wordplay.

Thomas Pierce wanted to be caught! But then something changed. He had become ambivalent about his capture. Why?

I looked at what I had assembled. "Son of a bitch," I muttered. "Isn't this something. He has a ritual."

I	Isabella Calais.
M	Stephanie Michaela Apt.
U	Ursula Davies.
R	Robert Michael Neel.
D	Brigid Dwyer.
E	Mary Ellen Klauk.
R	Robin Anne Schwartz.
E	Clark Daniel Ebel.
D	David Hale.

I	Isadore Morris.
S	Theresa Anne Secrest.
A	Elizabeth Allison Gragnano.
B	Barbara Maddalena.
E	Edwin Mueller.
L	Laurie Garnier.
L	Lewis Lavine.
A	Andrew Klauk.
C	Inspector Drew Cabot.
A	Dr. Abel Sante.
L	Simon Lewis Conklin.
A	Anthony Bruno.
I	Inez Marquez.
S	_____?

It read: I MURDERED ISABELLA CALAIS.

He had made it so easy for us. He was taunting us from the very beginning. Pierce wanted to be stopped, wanted to be caught. So why the hell hadn't he stopped himself? Why had the string of brutal murders gone on and on?

I MURDERED ISABELLA CALAIS.

The murders were a confession, and maybe Pierce was almost finished. Then what would happen? And who was *S*?

Was it Smith himself? Did S stand for Smith?

Would he symbolically murder Smith? Then Mr. Smith would disappear forever?

I called Kyle Craig and then Sampson, and I told them what I had found. It was past two in the morning, and neither of them was overjoyed to hear my voice or the news. They didn't know what to do with the word jumble and neither did I.

"I'm not sure what it gives us," Kyle said, "what it proves, Alex."

"I don't either. Not yet. It does tell us he's going to kill someone with an S in his name."

"George Steinbrenner," Kyle mumbled. "Strom Thurmond. Sting."

"Go back to sleep," I said.

My head was doing loops. Sleep wasn't an option for me. I half expected to get another message from Pierce, maybe even that night. He was mocking us. He had been from the beginning.

I wanted to get a message to him. Maybe I ought to communicate with Pierce through the newspapers or TV? We needed to get off the defensive and attack instead.

I lay in the darkness of my bedroom. *Could S be Mr. Smith?* I wondered. My head was throbbing. I was past being exhausted. I finally drifted off toward sleep. I was falling off the edge—when I grabbed hold.

I bolted up in bed. I was wide-awake now.
“S isn’t Smith.”
I knew who S was.

CHAPTER 125

and warned Kyle. “No more talk on the radio. Pierce is listening. That’s how he spotted us.”

I started the engine and gunned the sedan away from the curb. I pushed the speed up to sixty on heavily populated Lowell Road. We were actually closer to Route 2 than the others. We still might be able to cut Pierce off.

A shiny, silver BMW passed us, coming from the opposite direction on the road. The driver sat on her horn as we sped by. I couldn’t blame her. Sixty was a dangerous speed on the narrow village street. Everything was going crazy again, caroming out of control at the whim of a madman.

“There he is!” Sampson yelled.

Pierce’s car was heading into Concord Center, the most congested area of town. He was moving way too fast.

We sped past Colonial-style houses, then upscale shops, and finally approached Monument Square. I caught glimpses of the Town House, Concord Inn, the Masons Hall—then a sign for Route 62—another for Route 2.

Our sedan whisked by car after car on the village streets. Brakes screeched around us. Other cars honked, justifiably angry and afraid of the car chase in progress.

Sampson was holding his breath and so was I. There’s a joke about black men being pulled over illegally in suburban areas. The *DWB* violation. Driving while black. We were up to seventy inside the city limits.

We made it in one piece out of the town center—Walden Street—Main—then back onto Lowell Road approaching the highway.

I whipped around onto Route 2 and nearly spun out of control. The pedal was down to the floor. This was our best chance to get Thomas Pierce, maybe our last chance. Up ahead, Pierce knew this was it, too.

I was doing close to ninety now on Route 2, passing cars as if they were standing still. Pierce’s Thunderbird must have been pushing eighty-five. He’d spotted us early in the chase.

“We’re catching this squirrelly bastard now!” Sampson hollered at me. “Pierce goes down!”

We hit a deep pothole and the car momentarily left the road. We landed with a jarring *thud*. The wound in my side screamed. My head hurt. Sampson kept hollering in my ear about Pierce going down.

I could see his dark Thunderbird bobbing and weaving up ahead. Just a couple of car lengths separated us.

He’s a planner, I warned myself. *He knew this might happen*.

I finally caught up to Pierce and pulled alongside him. Both cars were doing close to ninety. Pierce took a quick glance over at us.

I felt strangely exhilarated. Adrenaline powered through my body. *Maybe we had him*. For a second or two, I was as totally insane as Pierce.

Pierce saluted with his right hand. “Dr. Cross,” he called through the open window, “we finally meet!”

CHAPTER 126

I like it, Cross!"

"Pull the hell over," Sampson's voice boomed. He had his Glock up and aimed at Pierce. "You butcher! You piece of shit!"

"I murdered Isabella Calais and I can't stop the killing. You hear what I'm saying, Cross? I murdered Isabella Calais, and I can't stop the killing."

I understood the chilling message. I'd gotten it the first time.

He was adding more letters to his list of victims. Pierce was creating a new, longer code: I murdered Isabella Calais, and I can't stop the killing. If he got away, he'd kill again and again. Maybe Thomas Pierce *wasn't* human, after all. He'd already intimated that he was his own god.

Pierce had out an automatic. He fired at us.

I yanked the steering wheel hard to the left, trying desperately to get us out of the line of fire. Our car leaned hard on its left front and rear wheels. Everything was blurred and out of focus. Sampson grabbed at the wheel. Excruciating pain shot through my wrist. I thought we were going over.

Pierce's Thunderbird shot off Route 2, rocketing down a side road. I don't know how he made the turnoff at the speed he was traveling. Maybe he didn't care whether he made it or not.

I managed to set our sedan back down on all four wheels. The FBI cars following Pierce shot past the turn. None of us could stop. Next, came a ragged ballet of skidding stops and U-turns, the screech and whine of tires and brakes. We'd lost sight of Pierce. He was behind us.

We raced back to the turnoff, then down a twisting, chevroned country road. We found the Thunderbird abandoned about two miles from Route 2.

My heart was thudding hard inside my chest. *Pierce wasn't in the car. Pierce wasn't here*.

The woods on both sides of the road were thick and offered lots of cover. Sampson and I climbed out of our car.

We hurried back into the dense thicket of fir trees, Glocks out. It was almost impossible to get through the underbrush. There was no sign of Thomas Pierce anywhere.

Pierce was gone.

CHAPTER 127

wants this to end. I think he's ready now. I saw it in his eyes."

"So, he had his chance back there in Concord. '*Pull off the road. Pull over, Pierce!*' You remember any of that? Sound familiar, Alex?"

I glanced at Sampson. "He needs to be in control. S was for Straw, but S is also for Smith. He has it figured out, John. He knows how he wants it to end. He always knew. It's important to him that he finish this."

Out of the corner of my eye I could see Sampson staring. "And? So? What the hell is that supposed to mean? Do you know how it ends?"

"He wants to end on S. It's magical for him. It's the way he has it figured, the way it has to be. It's his mind game, and he plays it obsessively. He can't stop playing. He told us that. He's still playing."

Sampson was clearly having trouble with this. We had just missed capturing Pierce an hour ago. Would he put himself at risk again? "You think he's that crazy?"

"I think he's that crazy, John. I'm sure of it."

CHAPTER 128

think that's what drove him mad. This one can *feel*."

The Cambridge police were gathered everywhere in the hallway. The local cops looked shell-shocked and wild-eyed. A photograph of Isabella stared out from the foyer. She looked beautiful, almost regal, and so very sad.

"Welcome to the wild, wacky world of Thomas Pierce," Sampson said.

A Cambridge detective explained the situation to us. He had silver-blond hair, an ageless hatchet face. He spoke in a low, confidential tone, almost a whisper. "Pierce is in the bedroom at the far end of the hall. Barricaded himself in there."

"The master bedroom, his and Isabella's room," I said.

The detective nodded. "Right, the master bedroom. I worked the original murder. I hate the prick. I saw what he did to her."

"What's he doing in the bedroom?" I asked.

The detective shook his head. "We think he's going to kill himself. He doesn't care to explain himself to us peons. He's got a gun. The powers that be are trying to decide whether to go in."

"He hurt anybody?" Sampson spoke up.

The Cambridge detective shook his head. "No, not that we know of. Not yet."

Sampson's eyes narrowed. "Then maybe we shouldn't interfere."

We walked down the narrow hallway to where several more detectives were talking among themselves. A couple of them were arguing and pointing toward the bedroom.

This is how he wants it. He's still in control.

"I'm Alex Cross," I told the detective-lieutenant on the scene. He knew who I was. "What has he said so far?"

The lieutenant was sweating. He was a bruiser, and a good thirty pounds over his fighting weight. "Told us that he killed Isabella Calais, confessed. I think we knew that already. Said he was going to kill himself." He rubbed his chin with his left hand. "We're trying to decide if we care. The FBI is on the way."

I pulled away from the lieutenant.

"Pierce," I called down the hallway. The talking going on outside the bedroom suddenly stopped. "Pierce! It's Alex Cross," I called again. "I want to come in, Pierce!"

I felt a chill. It was too quiet. Not a sound. Then I heard Pierce from the bedroom. He sounded tired and weak. Maybe it was an act. Who knew what he would pull next?

"Come in if you want. Just you, Cross."

"Let him go," Sampson whispered from behind. "Alex, let it go for once."

I turned to him. "I wish I could."

I pushed through the group of policemen at the end of the hallway. I remembered the poster that hung there: *Without God, We Are Condemned to Be Free.* Was that what this was about?

I took out my gun and slowly inched open the bedroom door. I wasn't prepared for what I saw.

Thomas Pierce was sprawled on the bed he had once shared with Isabella Calais.

He held a gleaming, razor-sharp scalpel in his hand.

CHAPTER 129

His arrogance reminded me of Soneji. “So why did I?”

“You were punishing yourself. Each murder was a reenactment of Isabella’s death. You repeated the ritual over and over. You suffered her death each time you killed.”

Thomas Pierce moaned. “Ohhh, ohhh. I murdered her here. In this bed!… Can you imagine? Of course you can’t. No one can.”

He raised the scalpel above his body.

“Pierce, don’t!”

I had to do something. I rushed him. I threw myself at him, and the scalpel jammed into my right palm. I screamed in pain as Pierce pulled it out.

I grabbed at the folded yellow-and-white-flowered comforter and pressed it against Pierce’s chest. He was fighting me, flopping around like a man having a seizure.

“Alex, no. Alex, look out!” I heard Sampson call out from behind me. I could see him out of the corner of my eye. He was moving fast toward the bed. “Alex, the scalpel!” he yelled.

Pierce was still struggling beneath me. He screamed obscenities. His strength was amazing. I didn’t know where the scalpel was, or if he still had it.

“Let Smith kill Pierce!” he screeched.

“No,” I yelled back. “I want you alive.”

Then the unthinkable—again.

Sampson fired from point-blank range. The explosion was deafening in the small bedroom. Thomas Pierce’s body convulsed on the bed. Both his legs kicked high in the air. He screeched like a badly wounded animal. He sounded inhuman—like an *alien*.

Sampson fired a second time. A strange guttural sound came from Pierce’s throat. His eyes rolled way back in his head. The whites showed. The scalpel dropped from his hand.

I shook my head. “No, John. No more. Pierce is dead. Mr. Smith is dead, too. May he rest in hell.”

EPILOGUE

CHAPTER 130

I had made it home again.

Chapter 131

Christine was wearing faded jeans and a plain white T-shirt tied at the waist. Her feet were bare. I had never seen her when she didn't look good to me, when she didn't make me feel a little light-headed.

"Are you really okay? Alex? I was out in the garden. I thought that maybe you were back from Boston. Now I'm having prescient feelings, premonitions, just like you."

I reached out and took Christine into my arms and suddenly everything was right. I felt whole again. I felt connected to the eternal river and all that good stuff. I had missed that feeling for too many years of my life.

"This was part of my premonition," she whispered. "I willed you here, Alex. I willed you into my arms."

We kissed and pressed against each other and it seemed as if we were merging, getting closer and closer. I loved the touch of her mouth against mine, the feel of her body, the way we fit. We were both strong, and yet we could be gentle together. I passionately believe in soul mates. I guess I always have. The best thing I had ever done in my life was to be in love. I missed it and was finally ready to love again.

"I missed you too much this time," I whispered against the softness of her cheek.

"I missed you," she said. "That's why I couldn't sleep. I knew you would come."

She's the one, I was thinking. I didn't have any doubt of it.

Heart leads head.

I cupped her face gently in my hands. She felt so precious to me.

"I love you more than I ever loved anything in my life. I love you so much. Marry me, Christine."

About the Author